THE BOY AND THE BARON

BY ADELINE KNAPP

THE BOY AND THE BARON

"THE TWO KNIGHTS WHEELED THEIR HORSES AND DASHED AT EACH OTHER AGAIN AND AGAIN."

ST NICHOLAS BOOKS

THE BOY AND THE BARON

BY ADELINE KNAPP

D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
Incorporated
NEW YORK 1941 LONDON

451450

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TO

MERODINE KEELER

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CHAPTER I

WHAT THE CHILDREN SAW FROM THE PLAYGROUND ON THE PLATEAU

ONE sunny forenoon in the month of May, something over six hundred years ago, some children were playing under the oak-trees that grew in little companies here and there in a pleasant meadow on a high plateau. This meadow was part of a great table-land overlooking a wide stretch of country. It was hedged along the west with white-thorn, setting it off from the tillage on the other side, and on the east it dipped to the bank of a little stream fringed with willows and low

bushes. The south side descended in a steep cliff, and up and down its slope the huts of a little village seemed to climb along the stony path that led to the plateau. Farther away lines of dark forest stretched off out of sight, in solid walls that looked almost black over against the bright green of meadow and field and the rich brown of the tilled land. On all sides were mountains, covered with trees or crowned with snow, from which, when the sun went down, the wind blew chill. Beyond the stream a highway climbed the valley, and the children could see, from their playground, the place where it issued from the edge of the wood. They could not follow its windings very far beyond the plateau, however, for it soon bent off to the left and wound up a narrow pass among the hills.

Toward the north, and far overhead, rose the grim walls and towers of the great castle that watched the pass and sheltered the little village on the cliff-

side. Those were rude, stern times, and the people in the village were often glad of the protection which the castle gave from attacks by stranger invaders; but they paid for their security, from time to time, when the defenders themselves sallied forth upon the hamlet and took toll from its flocks and herds.

It was "the evil time when there was no emperor" in Germany. Of real rule there was none in the land, but every man held his life in his own charge. Knights sworn to deeds of mercy and bravery, returning from the holy war which waged to uphold Christ's name at Jerusalem, were undone by the lawlessness of the times, and, forgetful of all knightly vows, turned robbers and foes where they should have been warders and helpers. The lesser nobles and landholders were become freebooters and plunderers, while the common people, pillaged and oppressed by these, had few rights and less freedom, as must always be the case with peoples

or with single souls where there is no strong law, fended and loved by those whom it is meant to help.

The children under the oak-trees played at knights and robbers. Neighboring the meadow was the common pasture, where tethered goats and sheep, and large, slow cattle, stood them as great flocks and caravans to sally out upon and harry. Now and again a party would break forth from one clump of trees to raid their playmates in a pretended village within another. Of storming castles, or of real knights' play, they knew naught; for they were of the common people, poor working-folk sunk to a state but little above thraldom, and heard, in the guarded talk of their elders, stories only of the robber knights' dark acts, never of deeds daring and true, such as belong to unspotted knighthood.

As the whole company lay in make-believe ambush among the shrubbery near the edge of the plateau, Ludovic, the old-

est boy, suddenly called to them to look where, from the forest, a figure on horseback was coming out upon the highway.

"See," Ludovic cried. "Yonder comes a sightly knight. Look, Hansei, at his shining armor and his glittering lance."

"He is none of hereabout," nodded Hansei, flashing his wide blue eyes upon the gleaming figure. "My lord's men-at-arms are none so shining fair. Whence may he be, Ludovic?"

"How should I know?" asked Ludovic, testily, with the older boy's vexation when a youngster asks him that which he cannot answer.

"Small chance he bringeth good," added he, "wherever he be from; but, in any case, let us lie here until he passes."

"He weareth a long, ruddy beard," said keen-eyed Gretel, as a slight bend in the road brought the knight full-facing the group. "Oh, Ludovic," she suddenly cried, "what if it should be Barbarossa, come to help the land again?"

"Barbarossa!" exclaimed Ludovic, scornfully. "Old woman's yarn! Mark ye, Gretel, Barbarossa will never wake from his sleep. He has forgotten the land. My father says God has forgotten it in his heaven, and how shall Barbarossa remember it, sleeping in his stone chamber? No; it is the truth: he will never come."

"It is no long beard," said Hansei, who had been watching eagerly. "'T is something that he bears before him at his saddle-peak."

This was indeed true. The shining stranger, as the children could now plainly see, held in front of him, on the saddle-peak, a good-sized burden, though what it was the young watchers could not, for the distance, make out. Nevertheless they could see that it was no common burden; nor, in truth, was it any common figure that rode along the highway. He was still some distance off, but already the children began to hear the ring of the great horse's iron hoofs on

"THE SHINING STRANGER HELD IN FRONT OF HIM A GOOD-SIZED BURDEN."

the stones of the road, and the jangle of metal about the rider when sword and armor clashed out their music to the time of trotting hoofs. As they watched and harkened, their delight and wonder ever growing, they suddenly caught, when the knight had now drawn much closer, the tuneful winding of a horn.

The rider on the highway heard the sound as well; but, to the children's amaze, instead of pricking forward the faster, like a knight of hot courage, he drew rein and turned half-way about, as minded to seek shelter among the willows growing along-stream. There was no shelter there, however, for man or horse, and on the other hand the narrowing valley shut the road in, with no footing up the wooded bluff. When the knight saw all this, he rode close into the thicket, and leaning from his saddle, dropped, with wondrous gentleness, his burden among the osiers.

"'T is some treasure," murmured Ludovic. "He fears the robber knights may get it."

By now there showed, coming down the pass, another knight. But the second comer was no such goodly figure as the one below. His armor, instead of gleaming in the sunlight, was tarnished and stained. His helmet was black and unplumed, and upon his shield appeared the white cross of a Crusader. Nevertheless, albeit of no glistening splendor, he was of right knightly mien, and the horse he bestrode was a fine creature, whose springy step seemed to scorn the road he trod.

"'T is a knight from the castle," the children said, and Hansei added: "Mighty Herr Banf, by his white cross. Now there will be fighting."

Down below, where the road widened a bit, winding with a bend of the stream, the shining stranger sat his horse, waiting, lance at rest, to see what the black knight

would do. The moment the latter espied him he left the matter in no doubt, but couched his lance and bore hard along the road, as minded to make an end of the stranger; whereupon the latter urged forward his own steed, and the two came together with a huge rush, so that the crash of armor against armor rang out fierce and clear up the pass, and both spears were shattered in the onset.

Then the two knights fought with their swords, dealing such blows as seemed to the children watching enough to fell forest trees. They wheeled their horses and dashed at each other again and again, until the air was filled with the din of fighting, and the young watchers were spellbound at the sight.

The shining stranger was a knight of valor, despite the unwillingness he first showed. He laid on stoutly with his blade, so that more than once his foe reeled in saddle; but the black knight came back each time with greater fury,

while the stranger and his horse were plainly weary.

Especially was this true of the horse. Eagerly he wheeled and sprang forward to each fresh charge; but each time he dashed on more heavily, and more than once he stumbled, so that his rider missed a blow, and was like to have come to the ground through the empty swing of his sword.

At last the Crusader came on with mighty force, whereupon his foe charged again to meet him; but the weary horse stumbled, caught himself, staggered forward a pace or two, and came first to his knees, then shoulder down, upon the rough stones of the road. The shining knight pitched forward over his head, and lay quite still in the highway, while the Crusader reined in beside him with threatening blade, and shouted to him to cry "quits." But the stranger neither moved nor spoke; so the other lighted down from his horse and bent over him to see his face.

"PUTTING HORN TO LIP, HE BLEW FOUR GREAT BLASTS."

When he had done this he drew back, and putting horn to lip, blew four great blasts, which he repeated again and again, waiting after each to listen.

Presently an answering horn sounded in the distance, and a little later a party of mounted men came dashing down the road from the castle. These clustered about the fallen knight, and when one who seemed to be their leader, and whom the children knew for Baron Everhardt himself, saw the stranger's face, he turned to the victor and for very joy smote him between the iron-clad shoulders — from which the children thought that the newcomer could have been no friend of their baron.

Then the men stooped and by main force lifted the limp figure, in its jangling armor, and set it astride the great horse that stood stupidly by, as wondering what had befallen his master. The latter made no move, but lay forward on the good steed's neck, and so they made him

fast; after doing which, the whole party turned their faces upward and rode along toward the castle.

Not until the last sound died away up the pass did the children come out from their maze and great awe. They drew back from the edge of the cliff and looked wonderingly at one another, for it seemed to them as if years must have gone by since they had begun their play on the plateau. At last Ludovic spoke.

"The treasure is still among the osiers," he said. "When night falls, Hansei, thou and I will slip down across the stream and find it. There may be great riches there. But no word about it, for if they knew it at the castle we should lose our pains."

Solemnly little Hansei agreed to Ludovic's plan, and the children left the plateau, climbing down the rocky goat-paths to their homes along the cliff.

CHAPTER II

HOW KARL THE ARMORER TOOK THE SHINING KNIGHT'S TREASURE FROM AMONG THE OSIERS

THE children had scarcely gone from the plateau when there came down the defile from the castle a figure unlike, in manner and attire, any that had but shortly before gone that road.

This was a tall, broad-shouldered man, clad in leather that was worn and creased, showing much hard wear. Over his left shoulder he carried two great swords in their scabbards, and his right hand gripped a long, stout staff, the iron point of which now and then rang out against the stone of the road as he thrust his great arm forward in rhythm with the huge

stride of his long, leather-clad legs. The face beneath his hood was brown and weather-beaten, of long and thoughtful mold, but turned from overmuch sternness by the steady, kindly gleam of his gray eyes, pent in under great brows that met midway of his forehead, almost hiding the eyes from sight.

Had the children still been upon the plateau they would have known the figure for Karl of the forge in the forest below the village. He had been, as was often his errand, to the castle, this time with a breastlet that he had wrought for the baron, and was returning with the very sword wherewith the Herr Banf had made end of the shining knight, and with that blade also which had been the stranger's own, to make good all hurts to their tempered edges and fit them for further service in battle.

He swung along the descending road until he came over against the place by the clump of osiers, where the children

had seen the knight drop his burden. There he suddenly stopped, and leaned to listen. He thought that he heard a faint cry from the green tangle, so he waited a little space, to learn if it would sound again. Sure enough, it came a second time — a feeble, piteous moan, as of some young creature in distress and spent with long wailing.

"Now that is a pity," thought Karl. "Some wee lamb has slipped off the cliff and fallen into the stream."

He looked doubtfully at his burden, wondering what time it might take him to go to the rescue; but the little cry came again, so piteously that his soft heart would not let him wait longer. So, leaving the swords behind a boulder, he plunged in among the osiers; but he had gone but a step or two when he started back in dismay, for he had nearly trodden upon a yellow-haired babe who sat among the willows, looking up at him with great blue eyes in which the tears yet stood.

Terror was in every line of the small face, but the baby made no further sound. He only looked earnestly up at the bearded, black-browed face bent over him, until he met the armorer's eyes. Then he reached up his arms, and Karl stooped and raised him to his broad chest.

"Now what foul work is here, do you suppose?" he muttered to himself. "This is no chick from the village, nor from the castle either, I 'll be bound, or there 'd have been hue and cry ere this."

He pressed back the little face that had been buried against his neck, and surveyed it sharply. "What is thy name, little one?" he demanded at last.

At sound of the armorer's voice the child again looked at him, and seemed not to understand the question until Karl had several times repeated it, saying the words slowly and plainly, when at last the baby said, with a touch of impatience: "Wulf! Wulf!" adding plaintively: "Wulf hungry!"

Then he broke down and sobbed tiredly on Karl's big shoulder, so that the armorer was fain to hush him softly, comforting him with wonderful gentleness, while he drew from his own wallet a bit of coarse bread and gave it to the little fellow. The latter ate it with a sharp appetite, and afterward drank a deep draught from the leather cup which Karl filled from the stream. As he was drinking, a sound was heard as of some one passing on the road, whereupon the boy became suddenly still, looking at Karl in a way that made the armorer understand that for some reason it had been taught him that unknown sounds were a signal for silence.

"Ay?" thought Karl. "That 's naught like a baby. He 's been with hunted men, to learn that trick!"

When the child had eaten and drunk all he would, he settled down again in Karl's arms, asking no questions — if, indeed, he could talk enough to do so, a

matter of which the armorer doubted, for the little chap was but three or four years old at most. He seemed, however, well wonted to strangers, and to being carried from place to place; for he took it kindly when Karl settled him against his shoulder, throwing over him a sort of short cloak of travel-stained red stuff, in which he had been wrapped as he lay among the osiers, and stepped out upon the road. He first made sure that no one was in sight; then, regaining the swords, he walked hurriedly forward, minded to leave the highway as soon as he reached a little footpath he knew that led through the forest to his forge.

Good fortune favored him, and he gained the footpath without meeting any one; so that ere long the two were passing through the deep, friendly wood, the baby fast asleep in Karl's arms, one small arm half encircling the armorer's big neck, the other little fist clenched in the meshes of his grizzled beard. Karl stepped softly

as any woman, lest his charge awaken and take fresh fright at the gloomy way before them, and at the tall, dark trees, whose branches met over the travelers' heads.

Thus they fared, until at last they reached the forge, and the hut where the armorer dwelt alone. The way through the wood had been long, and the afternoon was well-nigh spent when Karl laid little Wulf upon a heap of skins just beyond the great chimney, and set himself to prepare food for himself and his charge.

CHAPTER III

HOW WULF FARED AT KARL THE ARMORER'S HUT

BIG Karl the armorer was busy at his forge, next morning, long before his wee guest awakened from the deep sleep of childhood, which he slept upon a pile of pelts in a corner of the smithy. Working with deft lightness of hand at a small, long anvil close beside the forge, Karl had tempered and hammered the broken point of Herr Banf's sword until the stout blade was again ready for yeoman service, and then he turned to the stranger knight's blade, which was broken somewhat about the hilt and guard.

It was a good weapon, and as Karl traced his finger thoughtfully down its

length he turned it toward the open door, that the early sunlight might catch it. Then he suddenly gave a start, and hastily carried the sword out into the full daylight, where he stared it over closely from hilt to point, turning it this way and that, with knit brows and a look of deep sorrow on his browned visage. After that he strode into the smithy, and went over to where the boy lay, still fast asleep.

Turning him over upon the pelts, he studied the little face as sharply as he had done the sword, noting the broad white brow, the delicate round of the cheek, and the set of the chin, firm despite its baby curves; and as he did so a great sternness came over the face of the armorer.

"There 's some awful work here," he said at last to himself. "Heaven be praised I came upon the little one! Would that I might have had a look at the face of that big knight."

Still musing, he turned and went to a

cleverly hid cupboard in the wall beside the great chimney. Opening this, he disclosed an array of blades of many sorts and shapes, and from among these he took one that in general appearance seemed the fellow of the stranger's weapon, save that it had, to all look, seen but scant service in warfare.

Karl compared the two, and then set to a strange task. Hanging the service-battered sword naked within the cupboard, he took the new blade and began to ill-treat it upon his anvil — battering the hilt, taking a bit of metal from the guard, and putting nicks into the edge, only to beat and grind them very carefully out again. He took a bottle of acid from a shelf and spilled a few drops where blade met hilt, wiping it off again when it had somewhat stained and roughened the steel. This roughness he afterward smoothed away, and worked at the sword until he had it in fair semblance of a hardly used tool put in good order by a skilful smith.

This done he sheathed it in the scabbard which the stranger had worn, and which was a fair sheath, wrought with gold ornaments cunningly devised. Karl looked at it with longing.

"I 'd like well to save it for ye, youngster," he said; "but 't is a fair risk as it stands. Let Herr Ritter Banf alone for having spied the gold o' this sheath; it must e'en go back to him." He laid the sheathed weapon away in a chest with Herr Banf's own until such time as he should make his next trip to the castle.

He had hardly done when, turning, he beheld the child watching him from the pile of skins, looking at the strange scene about him, but keeping quiet, though the tender lips quivered and the look in the blue eyes filled Karl with pity.

"There 's naught to fear, little one," he said with gruff kindness, lifting the boy from the pile. "I make sure you 're hungry by now, and here 's the remedy for that — and for fear, too, of your sort."

And from out the coals of the forge he drew a pannikin, where it had been keeping warm some porridge.

Very gently he proceeded to give it to the child, with some rich goat's milk to help it along. In truth, however, it needed not that to give the boy an appetite. He had eaten nothing the night before, seeming starved for sleep, but now he ate in a half-famished way that touched Karl's heart.

"In sooth, now," the latter said, watching him, "thou 'st roughed it, little one, and much I marvel what it all may mean. But one thing sure, this is no time to be asking about the farings of any of *thy* breed, so thou shalt e'en bide here with old Karl till these evil days lighten, or Barbarossa comes to help the land — if it be not past helping. It 'll be hard fare for thee, my sweet, but there 's no doing other. The castle yonder were worse for thee than the forge, here, with Karl."

"Karl?" The child spoke with the fearless ease of one wonted, even thus early, to question strangers, and to be answered by them.

"Ay, Karl," replied the armorer. "Karl, who will be father and mother to thee till such time as God sends thee to thine own again."

"Good Karl," said the baby, when the man ceased speaking, and he reached out his hands to the armorer. The latter lifted him and carried him to the forge door.

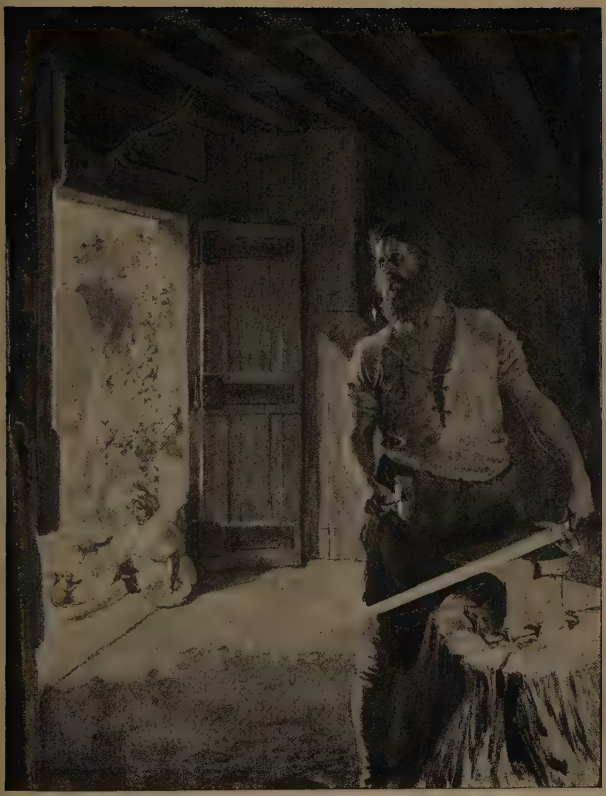
"Thou 'rt a sturdy rascal," he said, nodding approval of the firm, well-knit little figure. "Sit thou there and finish the porridge."

The little fellow sat in the wide door of the smithy and ate his coarse food with a relish good to see. It was a rough place into which he had tumbled — how rough he was too young to realize; but much worse, even of outward things, might have fallen to his share, as, indeed,

we shall see ere we have finished with young Wulf.

Deep within the heart of each one of us, no matter how old, there lives a child. All our strength, all that the years bring us of gain or good, help us not at all if these do not serve to fend this child from harm, and to keep it good. Big Karl at his forge knew naught of books, and to him, in those evil days, had come much knowledge of the cruelty and wickedness of evil men. Nevertheless, safe within his strong nature dwelt the child-soul, unhurt by all these. It looked from his honest blue eyes, and put tenderness into the strength of his great hands when he touched the other child, and this child-soul was to be the boy's playmate through the years of childhood. A wholesome playmate it was, keeping Wulf company cleanly-wise, and no harm came to him, but rather good.

Then, beside the ministering care of the gentle, manly big armorer, little



"THE FOREST'S SMALL WILD LIFE CONSTANTLY CAME IN AT THE OPEN DOOR."

Wulf had through those years the teaching and companionship of the great forest. It grew close up about the shop, so that its small wild life constantly came in at the open door, or invited the youngster forth to play. Rabbits and squirrels peeped in at him; birds wandered in and built their nests in dark corners; and one winter a vixen fox took shelter with them, remaining until spring, and grew so tame that she would eat bread from Wulf's hand.

The great trees were his constant companions and friends, but one mighty oak that grew close beside the door, and sent out its huge arms completely over the shop, became, next to Karl, his chosen comrade. Whenever the armorer had to go to village or castle, Wulf used to take shelter in this tree; not so much from fear,— for even in those evil days the armorer's grandson, as he grew to be regarded by those who came about the forge, was too insignificant to be molested,— but be-

cause of his love for the great tree. As he became older he was able to climb higher and higher among its black arms, until at last he made him a nest in the very crown of the wood giant.

Every tree, throughout its life, stores up within its heart light and heat from the sun. It does this so well, because it is its appointed task in nature, that the very life and love that the sun stands for to us become a part of its being, knit up within its woody fiber. When we burn this wood in our stoves or our fireplaces, the warmth and blaze that are thrown out are just this sunshine which the tree has caught in its heart from the time it was a tiny seedling till the ax was laid at its root. So when we sit by the coal fire and enjoy its genial radiance, we are really warming ourselves by some of the same sunlight and warmth that sifted down through the leaves of great forest trees, perhaps thousands of years ago.

Of course little Wulf did not know all

this as we know it, but doubtless he knew much else that we do not know at all; at all events, he knew the sunshine of his own time and his own forest, and into his sound young heart there crept, as the years went by, somewhat of the strength and the sunshine-storing quality of his forest comrade, until, long before he became a man, those who knew him grew to feel that here was a strong, warm heart of human sunshine, ready to be useful and comforting wherever use and comfort were needed.

At first faint memories haunted him; but as the years passed he learned to think of them as a part of one of Karl's stories — one that he always meant to ask him to tell again, sometime. The years slipped away, however, and his childish impressions grew fainter and fainter, until at last they had quite faded into the far past.

But all this came about years after, and could not possibly have been fore-

seen by Karl the armorer as he stood at his forge and thought sadly on his own inability to do all that needed doing for the little one so suddenly and so strangely thrust upon his care.

CHAPTER IV

OF HOW WULF FIRST WENT TO THE CASTLE, AND WHAT BEFELL

FOR a matter of nine or ten years Wulf dwelt with Karl at the forge, and knew no other manner of finding than if he had been indeed the armorer's own grandson, as he was known to those who took the trouble to wonder, Karl himself never dissenting to the idea. He was now a well grown lad of perhaps fourteen years, not tall, but sturdy, strong of thigh and arm, good to look at, with a ruddy color, fair hair, and steady eyes that met the gaze fearlessly.

Karl had taught him to fence and thrust, and much of sword-play, in which the armorer was skilled, and while his

play at these was that of a lad, the boy could fairly hold his own with cudgel and quarter-staff, and more than once had surprised Karl by a clever feint or twist or a stout blow, when, as was their wont on summer evenings, the two wrestled or sparred together on the short green grass under the great oak-tree. Also, Wulf was beginning to be of use at the forge, and great was his joy when, after repeated attempts, he at last made for himself a knife of excellent temper and an edge which even Karl found good. Thereafter this knife was his belt companion in all his woodland journeys.

He was happy, going about his work with the big armorer, or wandering up and down the forest, or, of long winter evenings, sitting beside the forge fire watching Karl, who used to sit, knife in hand, deftly carving a long-handled wooden spoon, or a bowl. The women in the village were always glad to trade for these with fresh eggs, or a pat of

butter, or a young fowl; for the armorer had as clever a knack with his knife as with his hammer. On these evenings he used to fill the boy's spirit with joy by tales of knightly craft, and of the brave gentlemen who, in years past, had ridden to the holy wars, and of deeds of gentleness and courage done by brave knights for country and king and the truth. Then it was that young Wulf felt his heart glow within him, and he longed for the time when he too might fare out to fight for the good, and to free the land from the evil that wasted field and meadow and ground down the people until no man dared hold up his head or meet, level-eyed, the gaze of his fellow.

It happened, at last, on a day when Karl was making ready to go to the castle with a corselet which he had mended for the baron himself, that the armorer met with an accident that changed Wulf's whole life. Karl was doing a bit of tinkering on the smaller anvil by the forge,

when one support of the iron gave way, and it fell, crushing the great toe of one foot so that the stout fellow fairly rocked with the pain, while Wulf made haste to prepare a poultice of wormwood for the hurt member.

Despite all their skill, however, the toe continued to swell and to stiffen, until it was plain that all thought of Karl's climbing the mountain that day, or for many days to come, must be put aside.

"There 's no help for it, lad," he said at last, as he sat on the big chest scowling blackly at his foot in its rough swathings. "It 's well on toward noon now, and the baron will pay me my wage on my own head if his corselet be not to hand to-day; for he rides to-morrow, with a company from the castle, on an errand beyond. Thou 'lt need to take the castle road, boy, and speedily, if thou 'rt to be back by night."

Nothing could have pleased Wulf more than such an errand; for although he

often went with Karl on other matters about the country, and had even gone with him as far as the Convent of St. Ursula on the other side of the forest, the armorer, despite his entreaties, had never allowed him to go along when his way lay toward the Swartzburg. This had puzzled the boy greatly, for Karl steadfastly refused him any reason why it should be. In truth Karl could hardly have given reason even to himself for his action. His unwillingness to take Wulf to the castle was, however, really grounded upon a fear of what as yet unknown thing might happen.

The boy made all haste, therefore, to get ready for the journey, lest Karl should repent of his plan. It was but the shortest of quarter-hours, in fact, before — his midday meal in a wallet at his belt, the armorer's iron-shot staff in his hand, and the corselet slung over his shoulder — he was passing through the wood toward the road to the Swartzburg.

Walking with the easy swing of one well wonted to the exercise, it was not so very long ere he had cleared the forest and was stepping up the rough stone road that climbed the mountain pass to the castle. He crossed the stream at a point very near the clump of willows below the plateau where, years before, the children had watched the shining knight's encounter with Herr Banf. Other children played on the plateau, as the little ones had done that fair morning, but Wulf hastened on, mindful only of the new adventure that lay before him.

Up and up the stony way he trudged stoutly, until it became at last the merest bridle-path, descending to the open moat across which the bridge was thrown. On a tower above he descried the sentry, and below, beyond the bridge, the great gates into the castle garth stood open.

Doubting somewhat as to what he ought to do, he crossed the bridge and passed through the gloomy opening that pierced

the thick wall. Once inside, he stood looking about him curiously, forgetful, in his wonder and delight at the scene, that Karl had told him to ask for Gotta Brent, Baron Everhardt's man-at-arms, and to deliver the corselet to him. This, by now, he had slipped from his shoulder and held with his arm thrust through its length, his fingers grasping its lower edge.

He was still without the inner wall of the castle, in a sort of courtyard of great size, the outer bailey of the stronghold. Beyond where he stood he could see a second wall with big gates similar to the one through which he had just passed. Before these gates in the outer court two young men were fencing, while a third stood beside them, acting as a sort of umpire or judge of fence. The contestants were very equally matched, and Wulf watched them with keenest enjoyment. He had fenced with Karl, and once or twice a knight, while waiting at the forge, had deigned to pass the time in crossing

blades with the boy, always to the latter's discomfiture; but he had never before stood by while two skilled men were at sword-play, and the sight held him spellbound.

Thanks to Karl, he was familiar with the mysteries of quart and tierce and all the rest, and followed with knowing delight each clever feint and thrust, made with the grace and precision of good fence. He could watch forever, it seemed to him; but as he stood thus, following the beautiful play, out through the gate of the inner bailey came three children —a girl a year or two younger than he, and two boys about his own age.

He gave them but the briefest glance, for just at that moment the players began a new set-to, and claimed his attention. In a little bit, however, he felt a sharp buffet at side of the head, and, turning, saw that one of the boys had thrown the rind of a melon so as to strike him on the cheek. As Wulf looked around, both

the boys were laughing; but the little girl stood somewhat off from them, her eyes flashing and her cheeks aglow as with anger. She said no word, but looked with great scorn upon her companions.

"Well, tinker," called the boy who had thrown the melon-rind, "mind thy manners before the lady! Have off thy cap or thou 'lt get this," and he grasped the other half-rind of melon, which the second boy held.

"Nay, Conradt!" the little maid cried, staying his hand. "The lad is a stranger, and come upon an errand; do we treat such folk thus?"

Wulf's cap was by now in his hand, and, with crimson cheeks, he made a shy salutation to the little girl, who returned it courteously, while the boys still laughed.

"What dost thou next, tinker?" the one whom she had called Conradt said, strutting forward. "Faith, thy manners sorely need mending. What dost to me?"

"Fight you," said Wulf, quick as a flash, and then drew back, abashed; for, as the boy came forward, he saw that he bore a great hump upon his twisted back, while one of his shoulders was higher than the other.

The deformed boy saw the motion, and his face grew dark with rage and hate.

"Thou 'lt fight me?" he screamed, springing forward. "Ay, that thou shalt, and rue it after, tinker's varlet that thou art!" And with his hand he smote Wulf upon the mouth, whereupon he dropped the corselet and clenched his fists, but could lay no blow on the pitiful creature before him. Seeing this, the other, half crazed with anger, drew a short sword which he wore, and made at Wulf, who raised the armorer's staff which he still held and struck the little blade to the ground.

By now the two fencers and their umpire were drawn near to see the trouble, and one of them picked up the sword.

"Come, cockerel," he said, restoring it to him, "put up thy spur and let be. Now, lad, what is the trouble?" and he turned sharp upon Wulf.

"'T is the armorer's cub," he said to his companions as he made him out. "By the rood, lad, canst not come on a small errand for thy master without brawling in this fashion in the castle yard? Go do thy message and get about home, and bid thy master teach thee what is due thy betters ere he sends thee hither again."

"Yon lad struck me," Wulf said stoutly. "I 've spoken no word till now."

"Truly, Herr Werner," put in the little girl, earnestly, "it is as he says. Conradt has e'en gone far out of his way to show the boy an ill will, though he has done naught."

At this Herr Werner looked again upon Conradt. "So, cockerel," he said. "Didst not get wisdom from the last pickle I pulled thee out of?"

"Why does the fellow hang about here, then?" demanded Conradt, sulkily. "Let him go to the stables, as he should, and leave his matter there."

"I was to see Gotta Brent," Wulf said, ignoring Conradt and speaking to the young knight.

"See him ye shall," was the reply. But anything further that Herr Werner might have said was cut short by the sound of a great hue and cry of men, and a groom ran through the gate shouting:

"Back! Back for your lives! The foul fiend himself is loose here!"

At his heels came half a dozen men, with stable forks and poles, and two others who were hanging with all their weight upon the bridle-reins of a great horse that was doing his best to throw off their hold, rearing and plunging furiously, and now and again lashing out with his iron-shod hoofs.

There was a hurrying to shelter of the group about Wulf, who stood alone now,

staring at the horse. The latter finally struck one of the grooms, so that the fellow lay where he rolled, at one side of the court, and then began a battle royal between horse and men.

One after another, and all together, the men tried to lay hold upon the dangling rein, only to be bitten, or struck, or tossed aside, as the case might be, until at last the huge beast stood free, in the middle of the court, while the grooms and stable-hangers made all haste to get out of the way, some limping, others rubbing heads or shoulders, and one nursing a badly bitten arm.

"Tinker," called the knight from behind an abutment of the wall, "art clean daft? Get away, before he makes a meal off thee! Gad! 't will take an arrow to save him now; and for that any man's life would be forfeit to Herr Banf."

There was a scream from the little girl; for the horse had spied Wulf, and came edging toward him, looking wild enough,

with ears laid back and teeth showing, as minded to make an end to the boy, as, doubtless, he was. For the life of him Wulf could not have told why he was not afraid as he stood there alone, and with no weapon save the armorer's staff, which he had not time to raise ere the beast was upon him.

Then were all who looked on amazed at what they saw, for close beside Wulf the horse stopped and began smelling the boy. Then he took to trembling in all his legs, and arched his neck and thrust his big head against Wulf's breast, until, half dazed, the boy raised a hand and began patting the broad neck and stroking the mane of the charger.

"By the rood," cried one of the grooms, "the tinker hath the horseman's word, and no mistake! The old imp knows it."

"See if thou canst take the halter, boy," called Herr Werner; and laying a hand upon the rein, Wulf stepped back a pace, whereupon the horse pressed close

"THE BOY BEGAN PATTING THE BROAD NECK OF THE CHARGER."

to him and whinnied eagerly, as if fearful that Wulf would leave him. He smelled him over again, thrusting his muzzle now into Wulf's hands, now against his face, and putting up his nose to take the boy's breath, as horses do with those they love.

"By my forefathers!" cried Herr Werner. "Could Herr Banf see him now—aha!"

He paused; for, hurrying into the courtyard, followed by still another frightened groom, came a knight who, seeing Wulf and the horse, stood as if rooted in his tracks. Softly now the charger stepped about the boy, nickering under his breath, so low that his nostrils hardly stirred; and at last he brought his knees to the pave, stooping meekly, as one who loved a service he would do, and thus waited.

An instant Wulf stood dazed. Then he passed his hand across his forehead; for a strange, troubled notion, as of some forgotten dream, passed through his brain.

At last, obeying some impelling instinct, that yet seemed to him like a memory, he laid a hand upon the horse's withers and sprang to his back.

Up, then, rose the noble creature, and stepped about the courtyard, tossing his head and gently champing the bit, as a horse will when he is pleased.

"Ride him to the stables, boy, and I will have word with thee there," cried the older knight, who had come out last; and pressing the rein, though still wondering to himself how he knew what to do, Wulf turned the steed through the inner gate, to the bailey, and letting him have his head, was carried proudly to the stables, whence the throng of grooms and stable-boys had come rushing. They came to the group of outbuildings and offices that made up the stables, followed by all the men, Herr Banf in the lead, and the place, which had been quite deserted, was immediately thronged, attendants from the castle itself coming on a run, as news spread

of the wonderful thing that was happening.

Once within the stable-yard, the horse stood quiet to let Wulf dismount; but not even Herr Banf himself would he let lay a hand upon him, though he stood meek as a sheep while the boy, instructed by the knight, did off the bridle and fastened on the halter; then he led his charge into a stall that one of the lads pointed out to him, and made him fast before the manger. When this was done the horse gave a rub of his head against Wulf, and then turned to eating his fodder, quietly, as though he never had done otherwise.

Then Herr Banf took to questioning Wulf sharply; but the boy could tell him but little. Indeed, some instinct warned him against speaking even of the faint thoughts stirring within him. He was full of anxiety to get away to Karl and tell him of this wonderful new experience, and he could say naught to the knight, save that he was Karl the armorer's

grandson, that he had never had the care of horses, and in his life had backed but few, chiefly those of the men-at-arms who rode with their masters to the forge when Karl's skill was needed. He was troubled, too, about Karl's hurt, of which he told Herr Banf, and begged to be let to hasten back to the smithy.

"Go, then," said Herr Banf, at last, "and I will see thy grandsire to-morrow; thou 'rt too promising a varlet to be left to grow up an armorer. We need thy kind elsewhere."

So, when he had given the nearly forgotten corselet to Gotta Brent, Wulf fared down the rocky way to the forge, where he told Karl all that had chanced to him that day.

"Let that remain with thee alone, boy," the armorer said, when the boy had told him of the strange memories that teemed in his brain. "These are no times to talk of such matters an thou 'dst keep a head on thy shoulders. Thou 'rt of my own

raising, Wulf; but more than that I cannot tell thee, for I do not know." And there the lad was forced to let the matter rest.

"It is all one with my dreams," he said to himself, as he sought his bed of skins. "Mayhap other dreams will make it clearer."

But no dreams troubled his healthy boy's sleep that night, nor woke he until the morning sun streamed full in his upturned face.

CHAPTER V

HOW WULF WENT TO THE SWARTZBURG, AND OF HIS BEGINNING THERE

IT was maybe a week after Wulf's visit to the Swartzburg that Herr Banf rode through the forest to the smithy. He was mounted upon the great stallion that had been so wild that day, and as he drew rein before the shop the horse gave a shrill neigh, for he smelled Wulf. Karl's foot was by so far recovered that he was able to limp about the forge, and he and the boy were busy mending a wrought hauberk of fine chain mail which the lady superior of St. Ursula had sent to them that morning.

"A fair day, friend Karl," the knight called out as he sat his horse under the

big oak-tree. "Here am I come for that youngster of thine. He is too useful a scamp to be let spend his days tinkering here. Haply he has told ye how this big Siegfried of mine took to him. I' faith, not a groom at the castle can handle the horse!"

"Ay?" said Karl, and he said no more, but stood with hands folded upon the top of his hammer and looked steadily at Herr Banf. Wulf, meanwhile, had dropped the tongs that he held, and run out to the horse, who now stood nuzzling his neck and face in great delight.

"By th' rood," cried Herr Banf, "'t is plain love at first sight! Came another so near Siegfried's teeth, and I 'd look to see him eaten. I must have the boy, Karl!"

Now, that great horse was none other than the one which the shining knight had bestrode on the day of his meeting with Herr Banf. The Crusader had taken the beast for his own charger, and a rare

war-horse he was, but getting on in years by now, and turning wild at times, after the manner of his kind. Not a groom or stable-lad about the castle but had reason to know his temper; so that, because of their fear of him, the horse often lacked for care.

When Herr Banf had said that Wulf must come with him, Karl stood silent for a moment, watching the lad at Siegfried's head; then, turning to the knight, he said:

"In truth, they seem fast friends. Well, it shall be as the boy shall choose."

"For what he says I will undertake," the knight said, laughing. "Wilt come to the castle, lad?"

Wulf looked from the horse to Karl and back again. 'T were easy to see where his desire lay.

"Shall I be able to see Grandsire Karl now and then?" he asked.

"As often as need be," said Herr Banf.

"What shall I say?" Wulf turned to Karl.

"What thou wilt," the armorer nodded. "We have talked o' that."

So had they, and Wulf's question was but the last wavering of the boy's heart, loath to leave all it had yet known. In another moment his will regained its strength, and the matter ended in his taking again the climbing road up the Swartzburg pass, this time with a hand clinging to Herr Banf's stirrup-leather, while the great horse stepped gently, keeping pace with the boy's stride.

"Where didst learn to bewitch a horse, lad?" the knight asked as they journeyed. "What is thy 'horseman's word'?"

"I have none," was the reply. "The horse seemed to know me, and I him. I cannot tell how or other."

"By my forefathers, but beasts be hard to understand as men! What was 't thou didst, by the way, to the little crooked cock at the castle?"

"Him they call Conradt, Herr Knight? I did naught."

"Well, he means to fight thee for it."

"Nay," replied Wulf, "that he 'll not."

"How is that?"

"It would not be becoming for me to fight him."

"So," Herr Banf said grimly. "Thou 'st a good idea of what is due thy betters."

"It is not that," explained Wulf, simply. "I am the better of us two; a whole man goes not against a weakling."

The knight looked keenly down at the lad, noting as he had not done before the easy movement of his body as he stepped lightly along, more like a soldier than like a peasant. He was alert and trim, with shapely shoulders and the head carried well up.

"A queer armorer's lad, this," thought Herr Banf, in some wonder. But by now they were before the castle watch-tower, and in a moment more, still with one hand at the knight's stirrup, Wulf again entered at the castle gate. There,

in the outer bailey, Herr Banf lighted down, and bade Wulf take Siegfried to the stables for the night.

A crowd of grooms were about the gates of the stable-yard as the boy came up, for the word had spread that the tinker had returned to take charge of the big horse, and dark looks were bent upon the newcomer.

"Shall I do with him as before?" Wulf asked of one of the loungers.

"That thou 'lt find out for thyself," was the surly answer, whereupon the other fellows laughed jeeringly.

Nothing daunted, Wulf proceeded to do off Siegfried's harness, amid the rude comments of the grooms, and by dint of using all his wit he managed to get the horse haltered and in stall.

Then he climbed to the loft and threw down some hay into the manger, as Karl had been mindful to tell him how, after which he found a measure and started in quest of the corn-house. The boys fol-

lowed at his heels, helping none, but getting great sport out of his hunt.

He found the place at last, and climbed the steps, still pursued by the jeering grooms. Heeding them naught, he walked along the corn-house floor, peering into the different bins, wondering from which to take the horse's feed. At last he came to one about half full, and this he deemed to be the one he sought; so he sprang upon the edge and leaned forward to fill his measure.

No sooner had he done so than he felt himself pushed from behind, and over he shot, head foremost, into the grain. Turning about in the yielding stuff, he rose to his feet just in time to be struck full in the forehead by the heavy lid of the bin; for the cowardly varlets slammed it down upon him and ran off to the horse-barn.

Not one of them turned back, and for any effort of theirs it might have gone hard with Wulf; for he lay stunned and helpless, slowly smothering in the tight

bin. Nor did he know when the lid was suddenly thrown back and a stern, wrathful man leaned over the edge to lift him out into the air. Then the man took him over his shoulder as if he had been a sack of meal, and carried him down the corn-house steps.

Into the horse-barn he bore him, and laid him upon the floor. The stable-boys were still there, and them the newcomer proceeded to score as one in authority, as indeed he was; for this was the master of the horse himself who now bent over Wulf, chafing his hands and doing what he could to bring him back to life; and so well did he work that ere long the boy sat up and looked about him until he presently remembered what was toward.

"Siegfried has not had his corn," he said faintly; but the master of horse bade him be quiet.

"Thou, Hansei," he said to the youngest of the boys who stood about, "get the measure and give the stallion his feed;

and mind how thou goest about him. As for ye others, get to work for a set of black imps as ye are; and be thankful that ye hang not, every rapscallion of ye, for this foul trick."

Picking up a billet of oak from where it lay on the floor, he hurled it among the group, who scattered, dodging this way and that, as every boy went to his own neglected task.

As for Wulf, he lay upon the barn floor and watched Hansei care for Siegfried, who was quiet enough now that the armorer's lad was with him. The lad Hansei was the same who had played with the others on the plateau on that day when the shining knight rode up the pass. Well was it for our boy that the honest young peasant took a liking to him, and was minded to stand his friend, for he had else scarce found comfort at the castle.

It was Hansei who at supper-time took him into the great hall where the

household and its hangers-on gathered for meals, and got for him a trencher and food; though little cared Wulf for eating on that first night when all was new and strange to him.

The hall was very large, and Wulf, looking up toward its lofty roof, could not see its timbers for the deep shadows there. At either end was a great fireplace, but the one at the upper end was the larger and finer. Near it, on a platform raised above the earthen floor, Baron Everhardt sat at board, with the knights of his train. Below them were the men-at-arms and lower officers of the castle; and seated upon benches about the walls were the fighting-men and general hangers-on of the place.

These sat not at board, but helped themselves to the food that was passed about among them after the tables were served, and ate, some from their hands, others from wooden trenchers which they had secured. Wulf and Hansei were among

the lowliest of the lot, and the stable-boys did not sit down at all, but took their supper standing, leaning against the wall just inside the door and farthest from the hearth, and they were among the last served.

But, as we have seen, Wulf cared little, that night, for food or drink, though his new friend pressed him to eat. He was sore-hearted and weary, what with the strangeness and the hardness of it all. Soon the great tankards began to pass from hand to hand; and the men drank long and deep, while jests and mighty laughter filled all the place, until only Wulf's sturdy boy's pride kept him from stealing out, through the darkness, back to Karl at the forge.

Presently, however, he began to notice faces among the company at the upper end of the hall. Two or three ladies were present, having come in by another door when the meal was well over, and these were sitting with the baron and

Herr Banf. One of the ladies, Hansei told him, was the baron's lady, and with her, Wulf noticed, was the little girl whom he had seen at the time of his first visit to the castle.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"A ward of our baron's," Hansei answered, "and she is the Fräulein Elise von Hofenhoer. They say she is to be married, in good time, to young Conradt; and that be a sorry weird for any maiden."

"Conradt?"

"Yea; the crooked stick yonder, the baron's precious nephew."

Following Hansei's glance, Wulf descried the hunchback boy of his adventure seated at board, drinking from a great mug of ale. With him was the other boy, who, Hansei told him, was Waldemar Guelder, and some kin to Herr Banf, in whose charge he was, to be trained as a knight.

"He 's not such a bad one," the stable-boy said, "an it were not for Master

Conradt, who would drag down the best that had to do with him."

Thus, one by one, Hansei pointed out knights and followers, squires and men, until in Wulf's tired brain all was a jumble of names and faces that he knew not. Glad indeed was he when at last his companion nodded to him, and slipping out from the hall, they made their way to the horse-barn, where, up under the rafters of a great hay-filled loft, the pair made their beds in the fragrant grasses, and slept soundly until the stamping of horses below them, and the sunlight streaming into their faces through an open loft door, awakened them.

CHAPTER VI

HOW CONRADT PLOTTED MISCHIEF, AND HOW WULF WON A FRIEND

IT was perhaps a matter of six weeks after Wulf's coming to the Swartzburg that he sat, one day, in a wing of the stables, cleaning and shining Herr Banf's horse-gear. He was alone at the time, for all of the younger boys and hangers-on of the place were gone about the matter of a rat-catching trial between two rival dogs whose bragging owners had matched them; and of the others, most had ridden with the baron on a freebooting errand against a body of merchants known to be traveling that way with rich loads of goods and much money. Only Herr Werner, of all the knights, was at the castle.

Save for Hansei, who stood by him stoutly, Wulf had as yet made no friends among his fellow-workers, but full well had he shown himself able to take his own part; so that his bravery and prowess, and his heartiness to help whenever a lift or a hand was needed, had already won him a place and fair treatment among them. Moreover, his quick wit and craft with Siegfried, the terror of the stables, made the master of horse his powerful friend. And, again, Wulf was already growing well used to the ways of the place, so that it was with a right cheerful and contented mind that he sat, that day, scouring away upon a rusty stirrup-iron.

Presently it seemed to him that he heard a little noise from over by the stables, and peering along under the arch of the great saddle before him, he saw a puzzling thing. Crossing the stable floor with wary tread and watchful mien, as minded to do some deed privily, and fearful to be seen, was Conradt.

"Now what may he be bent upon?" Wulf asked of his own thought. "No good, I 'll lay wager!" And he sat very still, watching every movement of the little crooked fellow.

Down the long row of stalls went the hunchback, until he reached the large loose box where stood Siegfried. The stallion saw him, and laid back his ears, but made no further sign of noting the newcomer. Indeed, since Wulf had been his tender the old horse had grown much more governable, and for a month or more had given no trouble.

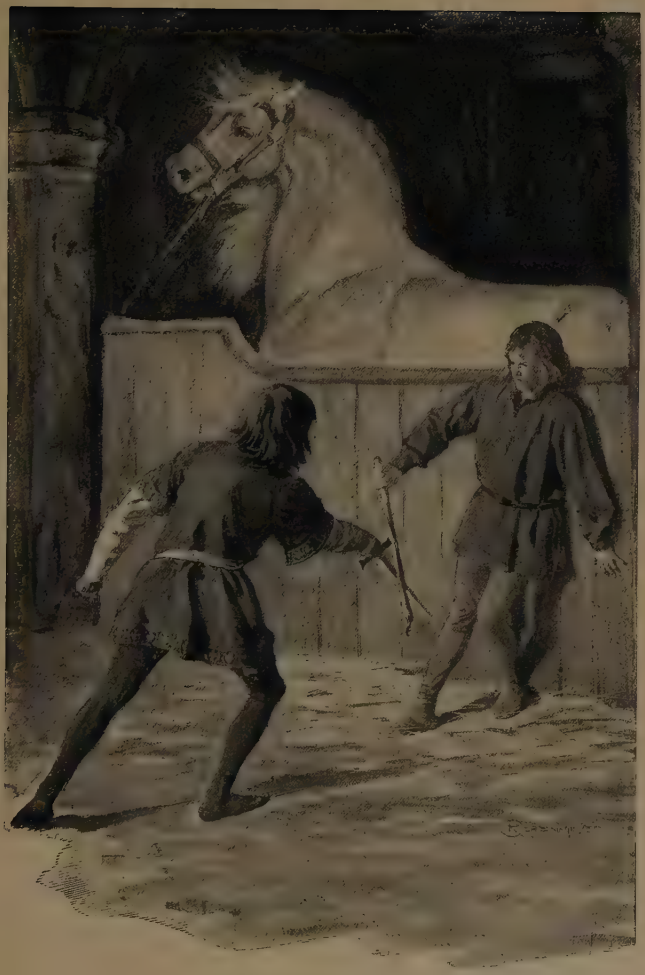
Conradt's face, however, as he drew nigh the stall, was of aspect so hateful and wicked that Wulf stilly, but with all speed, left his place and crept nearer, keeping in shelter behind the great racks of harness, to learn what might be toward. As he did so he was filled with amaze and wrath to see the hunchback, sword in hand, reach over the low wall of the stall and thrust at Siegfried. The horse shied

over and avoided the blade, though, from the plunge he made, Wulf deemed that he had felt the point.

While the watcher stood dumfounded, wondering what the thing might mean, Conradt sneaked around to the other side, plainly minded to try that wickedness again, whereupon Wulf sprang forward, snatching up, on his way, a flail that lay to his hand, flung down by one of the men from the threshing-floor.

"Have done with yon!" he called as he ran; and forgetting, in his wrath, both the rank and the weakness of the misdoer, he shrieked: "What is 't wouldst do? Out with it, ere I husk thy soul from its shell with this!" and he raised the flail.

Taken unaware though he was, Conradt, who was rare skilful at fence, guarded on the instant, and by a clever twist of his blade cut clean in twain the leather hinge that held together the two halves of the flail. 'T was a master stroke whereat, angry as he was, Wulf wondered,



"WULF COULD NAUGHT BUT FEND AND PARRY WITH HIS STICK."

nor could he withhold a swordsman's delight in the blow, albeit the sword's wielder was plain proven a ruffian.

He had small time to think, however, for by now Conradt let at him full drive, and he was sore put to it to fend himself from the onslaught, having no other weapon than the handle of the flail.

Evil was in the hunchback's eyes as he pressed up against his foe, and evil lay at his heart as well, as Wulf was not slow to be aware. The latter could naught but fend and parry with his stick; but this he did with coolness and skill, as he stood back to wall against the stall, watching every move of that malignant wight with whom he fought.

Up, down, in, out, thrust, parry, return! The sounds filled the barn. Wulf was the taller and equally skilled, but Conradt's weapon gave him an advantage that, but for the blindness of his hatred, had soon won his way for him. But soon he was fair weary with fury, and Wulf

began to think that he would soon make end of the trouble, when he felt a sharp prick, and something warm and wet began to trickle down his right arm, filling his hand. Conradt saw the stain and gave a joyful grunt.

"One for thee, tinker," he gasped, his breath nigh spent. "I 'll let a little more of thy mongrel blood ere I quit."

"An thou dost," cried Wulf, stung to a fury he seldom felt, "save a drop for thyself. A little that 's honest would not come amiss i' the black stream in thy veins." And he guarded again as Conradt came on.

This the latter did with a rush, at which Wulf sprang aside, and ere his foe could whirl he came at him askance, catching his sword-hand just across the back of the wrist with the tip of his stick, so that for an instant Conradt's arm dropped, and the point of his blade touched the floor. 'T was a trick in which Wulf felt little pride, though fair enough, and he did not

follow up the advantage, knowing he had his enemy beaten for the time.

The hunchback stood glaring at Wulf, but ere he could move to attack again a voice cried: "Well done, tinker. An ye had a blade our cockerel had crowed smaller, and I had missed a rare bit of sport."

On this both boys turned, for they knew that voice; and Herr Werner came forward, not laughing now, as mostly he was, but with a sterner look on his youthful face than even Conradt had ever seen.

"Now, then, how is this?" he demanded of Wulf. "What is this brawl about?"

The boy met Werner's eyes frankly. "He had best tell," he said, nodding toward Conradt.

"Suppose, then, thou dost"; and Herr Werner looked at the hunchback, who, his eyes going down before the knight's, lied, as was his wont.

"He came at me with the flail, and," he added, unable to withhold bragging, "I clipped it for him."

"And what hadst done to make him come at thee?"

"I did but look at the horses, and stood to play with old Siegfried, here. 'T is become so that my uncle the baron himself may yet look to be called to account by this tinker's upstart."

The stern lines about Herr Werner's mouth grew deeper.

"Heed thou this, Conradt," he said, with great earnestness. "Yonder was I, by the pillar, and saw this whole matter. What didst plan ill to the stallion for?"

"The truth is, not to have him hereabout," muttered Conradt, his face dark with fear and anger. "These be my uncle's stables, and this great beast hath had tooth or hoof toll from every one about the place."

"True, i' the main," Herr Werner said scornfully. "Is this why the baron hath

made thee master of the horse? Shall I tell him with what zeal thou followest thy duties?"

Conradt's face was fair distorted now; fear of his uncle's wrath was the one thing that kept the wickedness of his evil nature in any sort of check, and well he knew how bitter would be his taste of that wrath should this thing come to the baron's ears. So, too, knew Herr Werner, and, in less manner, Wulf; for his keen wit had taught him much during his six weeks' service at the castle.

"What shall I say to the baron of this?" demanded Herr Werner again, as he towered above them.

"I care not," muttered Conradt, falsely; but Wulf said:

"Need aught be said, Herr Werner? I hold naught against him, save for Siegfried's sake,"—with a loving glance over at the great horse,—"and 't is not likely he 'll be at this mischief again."

"What say, thou fine fellow?" asked

the young knight of Conradt; but the latter said no word.

"Bah!" cried Herr Werner, at last. "Why, the tinker lad is a truer man than thou on every showing; get hence, that I waste on thee no more of the time should go to his wound," he added; for Wulf, in moving his arm, had suddenly flinched and his face was pale. In another moment Herr Werner had the hurt member in hand, and as he was, like most men of that rude time, somewhat skilled in caring for wounds, he had soon bandaged this one, which was of no great extent, but more painful than serious, and was quickly eased.

Meanwhile Conradt had moved off, leaving the two alone. Though it would never be set to his credit, his malice had wrought a good work; for in that hour our Wulf got himself a strong and true friend in the young knight, who was fair won by the sterling stuff that showed in the lad.

"He hath more of knightliness in him

here in the stables," thought he, as he left Wulf, "than Conradt will ever know as lord of the castle; and, by my forefathers, he shall have what chance may be mine to give him!"

And that vow Herr Werner never forgot.

CHAPTER VII

HOW WULF CLIMBED THE IVY TOWER, AND WHAT HE SAW AT THE BARRED WINDOW

GOOD as his word had Herr Werner been in finding Wulf the chance to show that other stuff dwelt in him than might go to the making of a mere stable-lad. For the next three years he was under the young knight's helping protection, and, thanks to the latter's good offices in part, but in the end, as must always be the case, with boy or man, thanks to his own efforts, he made so good use of his chance that his tinker origin was haply overlooked, if not forgotten, by those left behind him as he mounted height by height of the castle's life.

Not that these forgave him his rise. Those small, mean souls had sought the hurt of the boy, but, when all was said and done, 't was hard to hold hatred of such a nature as his. The training of old Karl and of the forest had done its work well with him, and he was still the simple, sunny-hearted Wulf of the forge, ever ready to help, forgiving even where forgiveness was unsought, and keeping still, amid all the foulness and wickedness of that dark time and in that evil place, the clean, wholesome child nature that had dwelt in the baby among the osiers.

He was by now a sturdy, broad-chested young fellow, getting well on to manhood, noted for his strength, and for his skill in all the games and feats of prowess and endurance that were a part of the training of boys in those days. Already had he ridden with Herr Werner in battle, and though no real armiger, by reason of his lowly birth, yet was he, in the disorder of the times, unchallenged as the knight's

chosen attendant and buckler-bearer on the lawless raids on which the baron led his train. Indeed, the baron himself had more than once taken note of the youth, and had on two occasions made him his messenger on errands both perilous and nice, calling for wit as well as bravery.

Only Conradt hated him still — Conradt, with the sorry, twisted soul that held to hatred as surely as Wulf held to love. He was a year or two older than Wulf, and was already a candidate for knighthood; for, despite his crooked body, he was skilled, beyond many who rode in his uncle's following, in all play at arms. There was no better swordsman even among the younger knights, and among the bowmen he had already a name.

Despite all this, however, the baron's nephew was held in light esteem, even among that train of robbers and bandits — for naught better were they, in truth, despite their knighthood and their gentlehood. They lived by foray and pillage,

and petty warfare with other bands like themselves, and in many a village were dark stories whispered of their wild raids.

Yet none of these would hold fellowship with Conradt, albeit they dared not openly flout the baron's nephew. Nevertheless, he had gathered to himself a manner of following from the villages and countryside about the Swartzburg: criminals and refugees, for the most part, men who had suffered for their misdeeds at the hands of such law as was in the land; fellows whom no other leader would own, but who gladly fell in under a headship as bad as they. These ranged the forest wide and far, and from their evil raids was no poor man free nor helpless woman safe.

Well knew the baron, overlord of all that district, of the doings of his doughty nephew; but for reasons of his own he saw fit to wink at them, save when some worse infamy than common was brought to his notice in such fashion that he could

not pass it by. He were a brave man, however, who could dare the baron's wrath so far as to complain lightly to him of Conradt, so the fellow went for the most part scot-free of his misdeeds, save so far as he might feel the scorn and shunning of his equals.

It was on a bright autumn afternoon that a company of the boys and younger men of the Swartzburg were trying feats of strength, and of athletic skill, before the castle, in the inner bailey. From a little balcony overlooking the terrace the ladies of the household looked down upon the sports, to which their presence gave more than ordinary zest. Among the ladies was Elise, now grown a fair maiden of some fifteen years. Well was she known to be meant by the baron for the bride of his nephew; but this knowledge among the youths of the place did not hinder many a quick glance from wandering her way, and already had more than one young squire chosen her as the lady

of his worship, for whose sake he pledged himself, as the manner of the time was, to deeds of bravery and high virtue.

The contestants in the courtyard had been wrestling and racing; there had been tilts with the spear, and bouts with the fists, and some sword-play, when at last one of the number challenged his fellows to a climbing trial of the hardest sort.

Just where the massive square bulk of the keep raised its grim stories, a great buttress thrust boldly out from the castle, running up beside the wall of the tower for a considerable distance. The two were just enough apart to be firmly touched, on either side, by a man who might stand between them, and it was a mighty test of courage and strength for a man to climb up between them, even a few yards, by hand and foot pressure only. It was a great feat to perform among the more ambitious knights and squires about the castle.

The challenger on this afternoon was

young Waldemar Guelder, Herr Banf's ward, now grown a stalwart squire; and he raised himself, by sheer strength of grip and pressure of foot and open hand against the rough stones, up and up, until he reached the point, some thirty feet above ground, where the buttress bent in to the main wall again, and gave no further support to the climber, who was fain to come down by the same way as he went up.

Shouts of "Well done! Well done!" greeted Waldemar's deed when he reached the ground, panting, but flushed with pride, and looked up toward the balcony, whence came a clapping of fair hands and waving of white kerchiefs in token that his prowess had been noted.

Then one after another made trial of the feat; but none, not even Conradt, who was accounted among the skilfulest climbers, was able to reach the mark set by young Guelder, until, last of all, for he had given place time after time to his eagerer fellows, Wulf's turn came.

He too glanced up at the balcony as he began the ascent, and Elise, meeting his glance, smiled down upon him. These two were good friends, in a frank fashion little common in that time, when the merest youths deemed it their duty to throw a tinge of sentimentality into their relation with all maids.

Conradt noted their glances, and glowered at Wulf as the latter prepared to climb. No sneer of his had ever moved Elise to treat "the tinker" with scorn. Indeed, Conradt sometimes fancied that her friendship for Wulf was in despite of him and of the mastership he often tried to assert over her. That, however, was impossible to an honest nature like Elise. She was Wulf's friend because of her hearty trust in him and liking for him, and so she leaned forward now, eager to see what he might do toward meeting Waldemar's feat.

Steadily Wulf set hands and feet to the stones, and braced himself for the

work. Reach by reach he raised himself higher, higher, until it was plain to all that he would find it no task to climb where the champion had done.

"He 'll win to it!" cried one and then another of the watchers, and Waldemar himself shouted out encouragement to the climber when once he seemed to falter. At last came a cry from Hansei: "He has it! Hurrah!" and a general shout went up. From the balcony, too, came the sound of applause as Wulf reached the top of the buttress.

"In truth, our tinker hath mounted in the world," sneered Conradt from the terrace. "Well, there 's naught more certain than that he 'll come down again."

Wulf heard the words, as Conradt meant he should, and caught, as well, the laugh that rose from some of the lower fellows. Then a murmur of surprise went through the company.

The walls of the keep were overgrown with ivy, so that only here and there a

mere shadow showed where a staircase window pierced the stones. In the recess where the young men were wont to climb the vines were torn down, but above the buttress, over both keep and castle, the great branches grew and clung, reaching clean to the top of the tower; and Wulf, unable to go farther between the walls, was now pulling himself up along the twisted ivy growth that covered the face of the tower.

On he went, minded to reach the top and scale the battlement. It was no such great feat, the lower wall once passed, but none of the watchers below had ever thought to try it, so were they surprised into the more admiration, while in the balcony was real fear for the adventurous climber.

He reached the top in safety, however, and passing along the parapet just below the battlement, turned a corner and was lost to their sight.

On the farther side of the keep he

found, as he had deemed likely, that the ivy gave him safe and easy support to the ground, so lowering himself to the vines again, he began the descent.

He had gone but a little way when, feeling with his feet for a lower hold, he found none directly under him, but was forced to reach out toward the side to get it, from which he judged that he must be opposite a window, and lowering himself farther, he came upon two upright iron bars set in a narrow casement nearly overgrown with ivy. Behind the bars all seemed dark; but as Wulf's eyes became wonted to the dimness, he became aware, first of a shadowy something that seemed to move, then of a face gaunt, white, and drawn, with great, unreasoning eyes that stared blankly into his own.

He felt his heart hammering at his ribs as he stared back. The piteous, vacant eyes seemed to draw his very soul, and a choking feeling came in his throat. For a full moment the two pairs of eyes gazed

"LOWERING HIMSELF FARTHER, HE CAME UPON A NARROW CASEMENT NEARLY OVERGROWN WITH IVY."

at each other, until Wulf felt as if his heart would break for sheer pity; then the white face behind the bars faded back into the darkness, and Wulf was ware once more of the world without, the yellow autumnal sunshine, and the green ivy with its black ropes of twisted stems, that were all that kept him from dashing to death on the stones of the courtyard below.

So shaken was he by what he had seen that he could scarcely hold by his hands while he reached for foothold. Little by little, however, he gathered strength, and came to himself again, until by the time he reached the ground he was once more able to face his fellows, who gathered about, full of praise for his feat.

But little cared our Wulf for their acclaim when, glancing up toward the balcony, he caught the wave of a white hand. His heart nearly leaped from his throat, a second later, as he saw a little gleam of color, and was aware that the hand held

a bit of bright ribband which presently fluttered over the edge of the balcony and down toward the terrace.

It never touched earth. There was a rush toward it by all the young men, each eager to grasp the token; but Wulf, with a leap that carried his outstretched hand high above the others, laid hold upon the prize and bore it quickly from out the press.

"'T is mine! Yield it!" screamed Conradt, rushing after him.

"Nay; that must thou prove," laughed Wulf, and winning easily away from the hunchback, he ran through the inner bailey to his own quarters, whence, being busy about some matters of Herr Werner's, he came forth not until nightfall. At that time Conradt did not see him; for the baron had summoned his nephew to him about a matter of which we shall hear more.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW BARON EVERHARDT WAS OUTLAWED, AND HOW WULF HEARD OF THE BABY IN THE OSIERS

ONE bright morning, not long after Wulf had climbed the ivy tower, there came to the Swartzburg a herald bearing a message whereat Baron Everhardt laughed long and loud. So also laughed the youngerlings of the place, when the thing came to be noised among them; albeit two or three, and in especial Wulf and Hansei, who was now head groom, laughed not, but were sore troubled.

The baron had been declared an outlaw.

For an emperor now ruled in Germany, and good folk had begun to dare hope

that the evil days might be drawing to a close. The new emperor was none other than Rudolf of Hapsburg, he who had been count of that name, and since coming to the throne he had bent his whole mind and strength to the task of bringing peace and good days to the land, and order and law within reach of the unhappy common folk whose lives were now passed in hardship and fear.

To this end the Emperor Rudolf had early sent to summon all of the barons and the lesser nobles of the land to come to his help against the rebel counts Ulric and Eberhard of Würtemberg, who had joined with King Ottakar of Bohemia to defy the new ruler. The head of the Swartzburg had been summoned, with the others, but, filled with contempt for "the poor Swiss count," as he dubbed the emperor, had defied him, and tore up the summons before the eyes of the herald who brought it.

Nevertheless, in spite of the refusal of

nearly all the nobles to aid their emperor, the latter had, with his own men, gone against the two rebel counts and their kingly ally, and had beaten their armies and brought them to sue for peace. Now he was turning his attention to the larger task of putting fear of the law and of rightful authority into the hearts of the robber nobles.

Of these a goodly number were already declared outlaws, and now the baron's turn had come. Moreover, one of the men of the Swartzburg, who had ridden beyond the mountains on a matter for the Herr Banf, had ridden back with word that the emperor, with a strong army, was already out against the outlawed strongholds, and meant soon to call at the Swartzburg.

"And a warm welcome shall we give this new emperor of ours," boasted Conradt, on the castle terrace. "Emperor, forsooth! By the rood! Count Rudolf will have need of all his Swiss rabble if

he would bring the Swartzburg's men to knee before him!"

A chorus of assent greeted this speech. For once his hearers listened respectfully to the baron's nephew. Right eager were all the young men for the fray that was threatening; and so great was their contempt for the emperor that they could see for it but one outcome.

"But that his Austrians were in revolt and his army divided," declared one, "King Ottakar had never yielded to the Swiss. He of Hapsburg will find it a harder matter to yoke the German barons." And all his hearers nodded assent to the bragging speech.

What Baron Everhardt, at council with his knights, thought of the outlook, not even Conradt, among those on the terrace, rightly knew; but a few hours later, by orders sent out through the stewards and the masters of arms and horse, the routine of the castle was being put upon a war footing, to the joy of the eager young men.

All were busy, each at his own line of duty, in the work of preparation for battle, and, to Wulf's delight, it fell to his lot to fare down the valley to the forge on an errand for Herr Werner, whose man he was.

It was a matter of some weeks since Wulf had seen Karl, and glad was he now to be going to him; for in his own mind he was sore perplexed in this matter of the new emperor's proclamation of the baron, and he longed for the armorer's wise and honest thought about it all.

"Thou hast seen this emperor of ours?" he said, as he sat curled, after his childish wont, in the doorway of the smithy, whence he could look, at will, within at the forge, or without adown a long green aisle of the forest.

"Ay," said Karl, proudly; "his own man-at-arms was I, as thou knowest, and that was on the holy war. Served him have I, and gripped his hand — the hand of an honest man and a sore needed one in this land to-day."

"Dost think he can master the barons?" the boy asked, and Karl looked troubled.

"These be ill times for thought, boy," he said, "and worse for speech; but the emperor is ruler in the land, and if he bring not order into our midst, then in truth are the scoffers wise, and God hath forgotten us up in heaven."

"Would I were of his train!" Wulf said quickly, and silence fell between them, during which the boy sat gazing, with troubled eyes, adown between the black trunks of the great trees. Karl, watching him, gathered rightly that he was worried as to his duty.

"An he be in truth the emperor by will of the people, and not alone of him at Rome," Wulf added at last, "then are all true men who love Germany bound to come to his banner."

"Ay." Karl thrust the iron he was welding deep into the glowing coals of the forge.

"But I am of the Swartzburg's men;

and how may I be an honest one and fail at this moment when every blade is needed?"

"'T is hard," Karl said, "and that only thine own heart can teach thee." He brought his hammer down upon the glowing iron till it sent out a shower of sparks. "No man may show another what honest action may be; but perhaps thou 'rt nearer being the emperor's man than the baron's, were the truth known. An I guess rightly, 't were ill faring if one of thy line raised blade against Rudolf of Hapsburg."

The armorer muttered this half in his beard, nor looked at Wulf as he spoke.

"Nay, Karl," the boy cried sharply; "make me no more riddles, but speak out plainly, man to man. What is this that thou hast ever held from me? What meanst thou by any line of mine?"

"Alas!" said the armorer, sadly. "Naught know I, in truth, and there 's the heartbreak. 'T is a chain of which some links are missing, and ill work is it

to make that blade fitten again. Would to God I did know, that I might speak of a surety that which my heart is settled upon. But this that I do know shalt thou hear to-day." And coming over by the doorway, Karl took seat upon the great chest near by, and fell to telling Wulf of that which we already know — of his trip to the Swartzburg a dozen years before, and how he had taken him from the osiers.

"Never saw I that knight, nor naught dared I ever ask of him; but slain was he by Herr Banf, and was no noise ever made of who he was. Only this I know: that the sword Herr Banf gave me to put in order had been that stranger's, and none other was it than one forged by these own hands for Count Wulfstanger of Hartsburg when he rode with Count Rudolf to Prussia, and he was our emperor's heart's friend. Three swords made I at that time, alike in temper and fashion; and one was for Count Wulfstanger, one

was his who is now emperor, and one I kept and brought with me to this place —" Karl halted just here, but Wulf was too taken with the tale to note that.

"But thou knowest not that aught had I to do with that stranger knight," he urged, longing for Karl's answer.

"That do I not. But, lad, thou 'rt fair like my Lord Bernard, as his own son might be; and tell me, how camest thou in the osiers just at that time? Oh, I have worn thin my poor wits over this thing. But naught have I been able to learn or guess. I did what I might, and if ever thou comest to thine own, and thine own be what I think — ah, boy, thou 'rt fit for it!" And the old armorer's face shone with loving pride as his eyes took in the figure in the doorway.

"I can bear arms and sit a horse and hold mine honor clean," said Wulf, simply. "But oh, Karl, fain would I know the rights of this matter."

He sighed, his thoughts going back to

the castle, and to the memory of a fair small hand fluttering a ribband down over the heads of a rabble of scrambling youths. Truly the tinker's lad, if such he was, was looking high.

"I wish that I might see that sword," he said at last.

"That thou mayest."

The armorer arose from his seat on the chest, and turned toward the cupboard; but just then there showed, riding out from the forest and up to the door of the forge, two or three riders whom Wulf knew to be from Conradt's mongrel band of thieves and cutthroats.

They had with them a matter of work that, he quickly saw, would keep Karl busy for an hour or two; so, mindful of his errand and of the need to get back to the Swartzburg, where so great things were toward, he arose from the doorway.

What of loyalty and duty his mind might fix upon at last, he knew not yet; but the thought of one who in the trouble

to come might be in danger drew him like a magnet. So, bidding Karl good-by, he went his way.

His mind was full of confused thoughts as he fared through the forest, and how long he had been walking he knew not when suddenly he heard a whistling twang, and an arrow speeding close past his head lodged in a tree not a foot from him.

Turning quick as flash, his eye caught sight of a fleeing figure beyond the nearest trees, and without an instant's halt Wulf sped after the runner.

He was fleet of foot, and not many moments was it ere he was up with his cowardly foe, and catching him by the shoulder with one strong hand, he whirled the fellow about and stood face to face with Conradt.

The hunchback had thrown away his bow and arrows the better to run, and now put hand to sword; but ere he could draw, Wulf put forth one long leg and

tripped him up, so that he lay upon his back on the turf, glaring up at Wulf, whose face glowed with unwonted anger and whose sword's point was at the breast of the prostrate ill-doer.

"Thou again?" he asked, when he had looked Conradt well over. "And what wouldst have this time? What thou 'rt likely to get is a quick shriving," he added.

There was no reply.

"What wast after?" Wulf persisted.

"Thy life," was the defiant answer. "To let thy tinker blood out — and to get the ribband ye stole."

"Softly," the other said. "That were an ugly word an any one heard it. My life thou 'rt not likely to get; as for the ribband, 't is as much mine as the other, and I am minded to keep both."

Conradt's only reply was a muttered curse; but his eyes rolled shiftily, glancing askance adown the woods, as seeking help.

"If thou 'rt looking for thy cutthroats,"

Wulf said, "they 're back at the forge, and likely to stay there an hour or so yet. Meantime, my pretty fellow," he asked wrathfully, "what shall I do to thee?"

A look of sullen despair crept over the hunchback's face.

"Thou 'lt do what is in thee," he snarled at last — "as I did with thee."

Wulf raised his sword; but looking down upon the fellow who would have slain him, he saw his ill-shapen body and distorted face, and noted the lurking fear in his restless eyes, and because it was in him to be pitiful and generous, his heart stirred with compassion, and he could not smite the creature lying there. Slowly his hands fell until the point of his sword rested upon the ground; then he spurned the figure lightly with his toe.

"Get thee up and be off," he said. "An thou bidest long here, it may not go so well with thee, after all."

Rolling over upon his face, Conradt sprang to his feet and slunk away, cur-

like, into the forest. His life had been spared, but the beast that dwelt within his bad heart was not tamed. He had been given another chance, such as the strong may give the weak, whether the weakness be of body or of soul, so the strong yet ward his own strength; but this he was too base to know, but deemed that fear had held Wulf's hand; so that he was not helped at all by the mercy that had spared him.

As for Wulf, he gave the meeting scant thought as he went on his way. The weightier matters that pressed upon his brain kept mind and heart engaged while he journeyed; but his duty seemed no clearer to him when he had reached the castle than it had done at the forge with Karl.

CHAPTER IX

OF THE ILL NEWS THAT THE BARON BROKE TO HIS MAIDEN WARD, AND OF HOW SHE TOOK THAT SAME

BARON EVERHARDT sat beside a table in the great hall of the castle, scowling blackly at a pile of weighty-seeming papers that lay before him. The baron could himself neither read nor write, but Father Franz, his confessor and penman, had been with him all forenoon, and together they had gone over the parchments, one by one, and the warrior noble had, to all seeming, found enough to keep his mind busy with them since; for he still sat as Father Franz had left him, fingering the huge sheets and staring at the big black-letter text that told him naught.

The parchments were none other than the deeds in the matters of the estate of the baron's ward, Fräulein Elise von Hofenhoer, regarding which estate the emperor had sent word that he should demand accounting after he had wrought order at the Swartzburg. The baron's face was not good to see when he recalled the words of the emperor's message.

"By the rood!" he muttered, bringing a clenched fist down on the table. "The poor Swiss count were wiser to busy himself with setting his own soul in order against coming to the Swartzburg."

He sprang from his chair and paced the floor wrathfully, when there entered to him his ward, whom he had sent to summon.

A stately slip of maidenhood was Elise: tall and fair, with fearless eyes of dark blue. She seemed older than her few years, and as she stood within the hall even the dark visage of the baron lightened at sight of her, and the growl of

his deep voice softened in answering her greeting.

"Sit ye down yonder," he said, nodding toward a great Flemish chair of oak over beyond the table.

Obediently Elise sank into its carven depths; but the baron paced the floor yet a while longer, while she waited for him to speak.

At last he came back to the table, and seated himself before it.

"There be many gruesome things in these hard days, Fräulein," he said, "and things that may easily work ill for a maid."

A startled look came into Elise's eyes, but naught said she, though the dread in her heart warned her what the baron's words might portend.

"Thou knowest," her guardian went on, "that thy father left thee in my care. Our good Hofenhoer! May he be at greater peace than we are like to know for many a long year!"

There was an oily smoothness in the

baron's tone that did not ease the fear in Elise's heart. Never had she known him to speak of her father, whom she could not remember, and, indeed, never before had he spoken to her at such length; for the baron was more at home in the saddle, or at tilt and foray, than with the women of his household. But he grew bland as any lawyer as he went on, with a gesture toward the parchments:

"These be all the matters of what property thy father left, though little enough of it have I been able to save for thee, what with the wickedness of the times; and now this greedy thief of a robber count who calls himself Emperor of Germany, forsooth, seems minded to take even that little—and thee into the bargain, belike — an we find not a way to hinder him."

"Take me?" Elise said in some amaze, as the baron seemed waiting her word.

"Ay. The fellow hath proclaimed me outlaw, though, for that matter, do I as

easily proclaim him interloper. So, doubtless, 't is even." And the baron smiled grimly.

"But that is by the way," he added, his bland air coming back. "I 've sent for thee on a weightier matter, Fräulein, for war and evil are all around us. I am none so young as once I was, and no man knows what may hap when this Swiss comes hunting the nobles of the land as he might chase wild dogs. 'T is plain thou must have a younger protector, and" —here the baron gave a snicker as he looked at Elise—"all maids be alike in this, I trow, that to none is a husband amiss. Is 't not so?"

Elise was by now turned white as death, and her slim fingers gripped hard on the chair-arms.

"What meanst thou, sir?" she asked faintly.

The baron's uneasy blandness slipped away before his readier frown, yet still he smiled in set fashion.

"Said I not," he cried, with clownish attempt at lightness, "that all maids are alike? Well knowest thou my meaning; yet wouldst thou question and hedge, like all the others. Canst be ready for thy marriage by the day after to-morrow? We must needs have thee a sheltered wife ere the Swiss hawk pounce upon thee and leave thee plucked. Moreover, thy groom waxes impatient these days."

"And who is he?" Elise almost whispered, with lips made stiff by dread.

"Who, indeed," snarled the baron, losing his scant self-mastery, "but my nephew, to whom, as well thou knowest, thou hast been betrothed since thou wert a child?"

The maiden sprang wildly to her feet, then cowered back in her chair and hid her face in her hands.

"Conradt? Oh, never, never!" she moaned.

"Come, come," her guardian said, not unkindly. "Conradt is no beauty, I

grant. God hath dealt hardly with him in a way that might well win him a maiden's pity," he added, with a sham piousness that made Elise shiver. "Thou must have a husband's protection," the baron went on. "Naught else will avail in these times. And 't was thy father's will."

"Nay; I believe not that," Elise cried, looking straight at him with flashing eyes. "Ne'er knew I my father, but 't were not in any father's heart, my lord, to will so dreadful a thing for his daughter. Not so will I dishonor that brave nobleman's memory as to believe that this was his will for me!"

The baron sprang up, dashing the parchments aside.

"Heed thy words, girl!" he roared. "Thy father's will or not thy father's will, thou 'lt wed my nephew on to-morrow's morrow!"

"Nay; that will I not!" The fair face was lifted and the small hands

clasped each other in their slender strength.

The baron laughed softly in his beard, a laugh not pleasant to hear.

"In sooth," he said, "'t is a tilt of precious web, the 'will not' of a maid, but naught so good a wedding garment as that thou 'lt need to find 'tween now and then."

Elise came a step nearer, with a gesture of pleading.

"My lord," she said, with earnest dignity, "ye cannot mean it! I am a poor, helpless maiden, with nor father nor brother to fend for me. Never can ye mean to do me this wrong."

"'T is needful, girl," the baron said, keeping his eyes lowered; "this is no time for thee to be unwed. Thou must have a legal protector other than I. Only a husband can hold thy property from the emperor's greed — and perhaps save thee from eviler straits."

"Nay; who cares for the wretched

stuff?" cried she, impatiently. "Ah, my lord, let it go! Take it, all of it, an ye will, and let me enter a convent — rather than this."

But for this the baron had no mind. Already had he turned his ward's property to his own use, and her marriage with Conradt was planned but that he might hide his theft from the knowledge of others. Well knew he how stern an accounting of his guardianship Mother Church would demand, did Elise enter her shelter; but he only said:

"Thou art not of age. Thou canst not take so grave a step. The law will not let thee consent."

"Then how may I consent to this other?"

"To this I consent for thee, minx. Let that suffice, and go about thy preparations."

"I cannot! I cannot! Oh, Herr Baron, dost thou not fear God? As he lives, I will never do this thing!"

Then the baron gripped her by the arm.

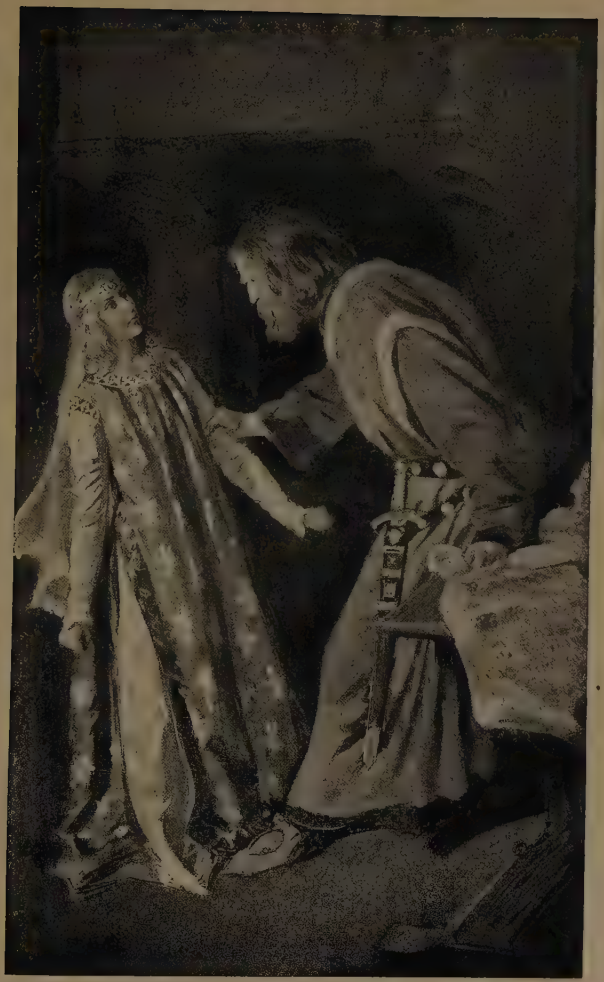
"Now, miss," he said, his face close to hers, "enough of folly. Yet am I master at the Swartzburg, and two days of grace have I granted thee; but a word more, and Father Franz shall make thee a bride this night an thy thieving cur of a bridegroom show his face in the castle. See, now; naught canst thou gain by thy stubborn unreason. I can have patience with a maid's whims, but an thou triest me too greatly, it will go hard but that I shall find a way to break thy stubborn will. But what thinkest thou to do to hinder my will?"

She was weeping silently, the great tears welling up unchecked and falling from her cheeks to the floor; but she answered proudly enough:

"I can yet die, sir."

He released her arm and flung her from him.

"That were not a bad notion," he sneered, "once the priest hath mumbled the words that make thee Conradt's wife.



"THEN THE BARON GRIPPED HER BY THE ARM."

But now get yonder and prepare thy bridal robes"; and he strode away.

Elise turned and fled from that place, scarce noting whither she went. Not back to the women's chambers; she could not face the baroness and her ladies until she had faced this monstrous trouble alone.

Out she sped, then, to the castle garden, fleeing, poor hunted fawn that she was, to the one spot of refuge she knew — the sheltering shade of a drooping elm, at whose foot welled up a little stream that, husbanded and led by careful gardening, wandered through the pleasance to water my lady's rose-garden beyond. There had ever been her favorite dreaming-place, and thither brought she this great woe wherewith she must wrestle. But ere she could cast herself down upon the welcoming moss at the roots of the tree, a figure started up from within the shadow of the great black trunk and came toward her.

She started back with a startled cry, wondering, even then, that aught could cause her trouble or dismay beyond what was already hers. In the next instant, however, she recognized Wulf. He was passing through the garden and had been minded to turn aside for a moment to sit beneath the elm where he knew the fair lily of the castle had her favorite nook. Sweet it seemed to him, in the stress of that troubled time, to linger there and let softer thoughts than those of war and of perplexing duties come in at will; but he was even then departing when he was aware of Elise coming toward him.

Then he saw her face, all distraught with pain and sorrow, and wrath filled him.

"What is it?" he cried. "Who hath harmed thee? 'T were an ill faring for him an I come nigh him!"

"Wulf, Wulf!" moaned Elise, as soon as she knew him. "Surely Mary Mother herself hath sent thee to help me!" And

standing there under the sheltering tree, she told him, as best she might for shame and woe and the maidenly wrath that were hers, the terrible doom fallen upon her.

And Wulf's face grew stern and white as he listened, and there fell off from it the boyish look of ease and light-heartedness that is the right of youth, and the look of a man came there, to stay until his death.

Now and again, as Elise spoke, his hand sought the dagger at his belt, and his breath came thick from beneath his teeth; but no words wasted he in wrath, for his wit was working fast on the matter before them, which was the finding of a way of escape for the maiden.

"There is but one way for it," he said at last, "and that must be this very night, for this business of the emperor's coming makes every moment beyond the present one a thing of doubt. It cannot be before midnight, though, that I may help thee;

for till then I guard the postern gate, and I may not leave that which is intrusted me. But after that do thou make shift to come to me here, and, God helping us, thou 'lt be from here ere daybreak."

"But whither can I go?" Elise cried, shrinking in terror from the bold step. "How may a maiden wander forth into the night?"

"That is a simple matter," said Wulf. "Where, indeed, but to the Convent of St. Ursula beyond the wood? Thou 'lt be safe there, for the lady superior is blood kin to the emperor, and already is the place under protection of his men. An he think to seek thee there, even our wild baron would pause before going against those walls."

"'T is a fair chance," said Elise, at last, "but an 't were still worse, 't were better worth trying, even to death, than to live to-morrow's morrow and what 't will bring"; and a shudder shook her till she sobbed with grief.

The time was too short even for much planning, while many things remained to be done; so Elise, ere long, sought her own little nest in the castle wing, there to make ready for flight, while Wulf took pains to show himself as usual about the tasks wherewith he was wont to fill his hours.

CHAPTER X

HOW WULF TOOK ELISE FROM THE SWARTZBURG

IT was a little past midnight, and the air was black and soft as velvet when two figures crept across the inner bailey and gained the outer court of the castle. Not easy was the journey for them, but feeling by hand and foot along the pave and the walls, Wulf led, his fingers never leaving the masonry, while Elise crept after him, holding fast by his sleeve.

One by one Wulf counted the buttresses of the wall, until one more would, he knew, bring them to the postern gate.

"Gotta Brent's son followed me on watch here," he whispered to Elise. "He is a sleepy fellow, and will not have got well settled to the tramp yet."

"Thou 'lt not harm him, Wulf?" she breathed back anxiously. "Ne'er again could I be happy if any hurt came to an innocent person through me."

"Nay; let thy heart be easy," replied Wulf. "I will but fix him in easy position for the good long sleep he loves. He were no fellow to be put on watch in time of danger."

Just then the clank of metal came to their ears, and they knew that the sentinel was drawing near on his beat.

Close back they pressed into the deep shadow of the bastion, while Elise put both hands over her heart in an instinct to muffle its wild beating. It seemed to her straining ears to sound above the shuffle of coming steps and the rattle of the watchman's armor and weapons.

Almost beside them, lantern in hand, the watch paused; but his body was between them and his light, and its rays did not shine into the bastion. After a moment he raised the staff which he carried

and struck a sharp blow against the stones.

The sudden sound wrung from Elise a little outcry, which she checked on her very lips, as it were; but the sentry must have caught somewhat of it, for he bent toward them, and Wulf braced himself to spring upon him, when of a sudden a call rang out from the sentinel on the watch-tower, far adown the wall.

"One hour past midnight, and all 's well," it said; and the watchman beside them took it up, bellowing forth the words until they sounded fair awful coming out of the darkness. From elsewhere — Wulf judged it to be the castle keep — the watch-cry sounded again, and ere it had clean died away Wulf gave a forward spring, catching the sentinel just as he was turning to walk adown his beat.

In a flash the fellow had received a blow from his own staff that quieted him. Then, dashing out the lantern, Wulf, as best he could in the darkness, thrust a soft lea-

thern gag into the man's mouth, making it fast by cords at the back of his head. Then he bound him, hand and foot, and, taking from the fellow's girdle the key of the postern, he grasped Elise's hand, and together they made out to open the gate and creep forth.

Between them and liberty there yet lay the ditch; but well Wulf knew where, at the foot of the steps leading from the postern, the warden's boat was tied, and, with every sense sharpened by the dangers about them, he managed to get Elise into the small craft. By now a few stars shone through the darkness, lighting them, feebly enough, to the other side, and presently the pair had clambered again ahead.

"Now for it!" whispered Wulf. "Gird thy skirts well, for an we win away now, 't will be by foot-fleetness."

Bravely Elise obeyed him, and taking her hand again, Wulf led off at a long, low run, none too hard for her prowess,

yet getting well over the ground. Thus they began descending the defile. It was cruel work for a tender maid, but Elise was of such stuff as in years gone had made her ancestors the warrior comrades of kings; she neither moaned nor flinched, but kept steady pace at Wulf's side.

Thus they fared for a matter of two or three miles, and had gotten well away down the pass when they caught, on the still night air, an alarum of horns that would be from the castle. Plainly something was astir, and that, most likely, the discovery that some one had come or gone by the postern gate.

"The boat will soon tell them which 't is," said Wulf, "and they 'll be after us just now."

They quickened pace, and, reckless of danger on the rough foothold, sped flockmeal down the stony road, Wulf with an arm about the maiden's waist, that he might lift her along over the roughest

places, she with a hand on his shoulder, hastening stoutly beside him.

By now they were beyond the steepest of the way, and near to where the stream that kept it company toward the valley widened over the plain for a matter of some miles by length, but of no great width, in a sedgy, grass-tufted morass, with here and there clumps of wild bog-willow and tall reeds.

The noise of pursuit sounded loud and terrible behind them, and they could almost tell the different voices of the men. Then, without warning, over the crest of the mountains towering up on one side rose the late moon, full and lambent, flooding the whole scene with light.

"Quick! quick!" cried Wulf; and fair lifting his companion, he swung down the rocks that edged the cliff, sliding, slipping, scrambling, still holding her safe, until with a spring they gained the shelter of the willows.

There they lay breathless for a moment,

while above them a party of horsemen swept by in full cry.

"They will soon be back," said Wulf, "for well will they guess that naught human can have won very far ahead of them. We must e'en pick our way over yonder, Elise."

"We can never!" gasped the girl, almost in despair.

"That were a long day," answered Wulf, easily. "I wot not if any other man from the castle can do it, but well know I how it can be done, and come aland in the thick of the wood."

Stooping, he lifted Elise in his strong arms, and resting her light weight on shoulder and chest, went easily forward, now stepping upon a reedy islet of green, just showing in the moonlight, now plunging almost waist-deep in water below which, other trips had taught him, was foothold, but never stopping until he drew near the other side. Then, sore wearied, he raised Elise, that she might

lay hold on some overhanging boughs and swing herself up among them, after which Wulf crawled ashore and lay panting, while Elise bent over him, calling him softly by name, and taking blame to herself for all his weariness.

He did but wait to get his breath, however; then, as they heard the hue and cry of the returning horsemen, he started up again. By the noise they could tell that another party had come down the pass and joined the first, but they did not linger to listen to them, but, freshened by their short rest, plunged into the forest.

Well was it for them that Wulf knew, as some men to-day know their home cities, the wayless depths of that wood. Open were they to him as a tilled field to the plowman, and with the sureness of a hiving bee he led Elise through the great tree-aisles. Here and there where boughs were thinner the moon's rays sifted in, and served now to lighten, now

merely to deepen the shadow; but for the most part it was fair dark, until, after long travel, as they came to a little bit of open where ancient forest fire had cleared the trees, they saw that the moonlight had given place to the first gray tint of dawn.

On they went for yet another hour, and now it was clear daylight when, sounding through the woods, came again the noise of horsemen. Evidently the baron's men had skirted the stream and struck through the forest. For all the fugitives knew, they might show before them any moment now.

"Wulf," cried Elise, "do thou leave me here. I can go no farther, but go thou on. I will stay to meet them. They dare not kill me,—would they might!—but if I stay and go back with them to the castle, thou canst escape, and thy death will not be at my charge."

"Hush!" Wulf answered, almost roughly. "Dost think I will do thy bidding in this? But here is no place to

hide. We must get on, an we may, where the bush is thicker. So hearten thyself for one more trial."

His arm once more on her waist, they ran on — she sobbing with weariness and fear for him — through the forest.

But nearer and nearer, louder and more clear, came the noise of their pursuers, and still more feebly ran the tired pair, stumbling over fallen boughs and matted tangles of dead leaves.

"Wulf! I am like to die of weariness," gasped Elise, at last. "Go on alone, I beg thee."

"Hark!" Wulf interrupted, with a quick gesture. "What is that?"

They were at the edge of another open, which they were minded to skirt, fearful to cross it and risk discovery; but beyond it came the sound of still another body of horsemen, crashing through the forest.

"Belike the party have divided," Wulf whispered, "the better to find us." But, even as he spoke, a squire rode from the

brush into the open, bearing a banner that Wulf had never before seen. He shrank back into the thicket, keeping tight hold of Elise's hand; but the newcomer had evidently ridden out by mistake from the body of his fellows, and retired again by the way he came. They could hear him going on through the brush.

"They are not Swartzburg riders," Wulf said, and then a mighty din arose among the trees. The woods rang on all sides with the cries of fighting-men and the clashing of weapons, and in another moment Wulf made out clearly the battle-cry of Baron Everhardt's men. But above it and all the din of fighting, there rose another cry: "For God and the emperor!" so that he knew that a party of Rudolf's men, if not his whole army, had fallen in with the pursuers, and his hot young blood stirred with longing to be in the fray.

Then he bethought him of the matter at hand.

"Now! now, Elise! this is our chance! We must be off! One more dash and we shall be where any band of horsemen will have much ado to follow, and well on our way to the convent."

He pressed to her lips an opened bottle filled with goat's milk, urging her to drink, and when she had done so she looked up at him with fresh courage in her eyes.

"I am ready," she said, rising. He stopped the bottle and secured it at his belt, and again they went on, dashing forward, unmindful of any noise they might make when all the wood was so full of direful sound. The new hope that had come to Elise gave her fresh strength, so that it seemed to her as if she had but just begun to run.

In this fashion they traveled on until at last Wulf halted in the deepest depth of the great forest.

"We shall be safe to rest here," he said, still speaking softly, "while we

break our fast." And there, beneath the dark old trees that seemed to bend and gather over them to hide and to comfort, they sank down, scarce able to move or speak.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT THE FUGITIVES FURTHER SAW IN THE FOREST, AND HOW THEY CAME TO ST. URSULA AND MET THE EMPEROR

AT last Wulf bestirred himself, turning to his companion.

"Art resting?" he asked. "That were a sharp tug to do again, winded as we are; but, please God, naught further will misadventure us. We may abide here until we are minded to go on. Or, stay; I know the very place!"

He pressed forward stilly, leading the weary girl, until, bending aside some hanging boughs, he suddenly started back, signing her to be quiet.

Before them was a little open glade, set round with young beech-trees, that showed lightly against the darker growths.

Within the nearly round inclosure grew a great walnut-tree, a little to one side; thorn and brier pressed back against the beeches all around, and the glade was thinly carpeted with sparse grass of delicate green, growing somewhat feebly in the deep leaf-mold.

There was no need for Wulf to enjoin silence upon Elise, once she had peeped within the glade. Leaning against the trunk of the walnut-tree, sword in hand, stood Conradt, while gathered about him were a number of men who, by their dress and arms, might have been knights — though greatly did their faces belie the knightly order.

They had evidently been feasting, for the disorder of a hearty meal lay about them on the leaves and grass, and the men were lounging as men are wont to do after feeding. Beside two of them, as they lay at ease, were bows, and Wulf marveled to note that these were ready strung.

"What foolishness is here," he thought as he watched, "to keep a resting bow strung, such fashion?"

The two watchers kept very still, for the gathering had an ill look, while as for Wulf, he heartily wished that Elise were well gotten away from the dangerous neighborhood. What the maiden's own feelings were, he could judge from the hard grip she kept upon his left hand — so hard that he well-nigh flinched with the pain. Nevertheless, her face showed no fear; only, as she looked upon Conradt, it wore a set resoluteness, making Wulf feel sure that whatever came she would not faint nor fall to crying, but what wit and might were hers would be to the fore.

All at once most of the men sprang up and bent forward as listening, each man by gesture silencing his fellows; then was Wulf mazed to note the look of that gathering.

The two bowmen stood staring straight

before them, making no motion toward their weapons until Conradt and another took them up and put them in the fellows' hands, when the boy saw that those archers were stone-blind. More than that, the man who helped Conradt fix their bows had but a short stump of a left forearm.

This stump he thrust through the arm-strap of a shield which he snatched from the ground, and drawing his sword, hurried across the glade, the archers following, holding by his jerkin.

While all this was going forward the two watchers became aware of the sound of a bell through the trees. It was plain that this was the sound which had roused the men. These still remained within the glade, but pressed forward toward the opening, ready to sally out upon whoever might pass.

"This be far from the road for merchants," Wulf thought. "Mayhap some caravan has lost its way. That bell

would be on the leading animal, which looks, an I 'm not a blunderer, as 't were likely to be too large a company for our Conradt's sorry crew."

Then he and Elise exchanged looks, for the sound was plainly coming toward the glade, as though the animal bearing the bell were traversing some woodland path.

The monstrous group before them also noted this, and Conradt, plucking the blind archers by their sleeves, led them back a little space, nearer to where Wulf and Elise were hidden. Here he stationed them, and setting their bows at aim toward a slight opening among the bushes on the other side, he went back to the walnut-tree.

"He fancies the travelers, if there be any, will come in at yon place," said Wulf to himself; "but 't is my belief that 't is naught, after all, but an estrayed bell-heifer wandering through the woods."

Then a man's voice sounded above the

noise of the bell. They could not make out its utterance, but something in the hoarse, droning cry chilled the listeners' hearts. The men within the glade looked at one another in awe.

"Mother of heaven! What may it be?" Elise whispered with white lips to Wulf.

He shook his head, not knowing, when in the opening at the yonder side of the glade a figure showed — a tall, gaunt figure of a man, indeed, but looking rather like some wild thing of the forest.

He was clad for the most part in the skins of beasts with the hair left on, and about his loins was knotted a rope from which hung the iron bell whose clangor had held their attention so long.

"'T is Bell-Hutten," whispered Wulf to Elise. "I might have guessed as much, but in truth ne'er saw I him before."

By now most of the group within the glade knew the man, for the whole countryside knew his history. He was a

harmless half-wit who, in years agone, had been as bright and forward as any man until one evil day when he had been hired by a company of merchants to set them through the forest, for such was the business he followed. This he had undertaken, riding the bell-horse at the head of the company; but the caravan had been set upon by robber knights, who spoiled the merchants of their goods. In the affair Hutten, the guide, had been wounded in the head, so that his wits were hurt; and since that day he had wandered in the forest, no man's man, living such ways as he might, but ever thinking himself estrayed from that company which he led, and seeking it, that he might guide the merchants through the woods.

It was talked among the forest folk and in the villages of the district that the guide had really been faithless and had led his charge into the ambush which those knights had made, and for this

reason many feared and shunned the man, even while they pitied him with the rough pity of the time. As to the truth of this harsh belief, however, no man knew, but many, when they heard his bell, which he had taken from the horse he had ridden that day, turned aside and went their ways, crossing themselves and praying to be delivered from the black sin of falseness to friends.

The stranger was plainly taken aback at the sight of the unfriendly-looking men in the open. He had been wailing forth a *miserere* as he walked, but the words were hushed upon his lips as he stood in his tracks for an instant and then turned to flee.

But the one-armed man did a woeful thing, whereat even Conradt cried out in dismay. Plucking from his belt a short dagger, he hurled it, with a curse upon him for giving them such a fright, after the retreating figure. The dagger struck the half-wit in the back, whereupon he

gave a great cry and staggered forward out of sight, while the dastard stood half appalled at his own wickedness.

Then all the robbers turned away from the doer of that foul deed, even the blind men refusing to be led away by him, as was evidently their wont, choosing instead to follow Conradt and the others out into the forest. Left thus to himself, the outcast struck into the woods alone, and soon not a sound could be heard of any of that company.

For a time Wulf and Elise dared not stir, but sat looking at each other with blanched faces, and lips still parted in horror. Then Wulf found tongue.

"We must get from here," he whispered hoarsely, wiping away the cold sweat that stood in great drops on his forehead. "Ay, but 't was a fearsome sight. I wonder thou didst not faint nor scream, Elise. In truth, thou 'rt stern stuff for such a slip of a maiden."

But Elise could only shake her head.

"Take me away," she moaned at last. "I can bear no more!"

First, however, Wulf drew from his wallet some bread and cheese, and opened again the bottle of goat's milk.

"'T is fair like to be butter," he said, "what with all our running and jouncing it, but do thou try to eat and drink now; 't will hearten us after this awful thing."

The milk was still sweet, and being young, wholesome creatures, the two made out to take the food and drink they needed, and were afterward able to go on their way, warily but steadily, through the woods. Nevertheless, it was close upon nightfall when the convent walls showed gray before them where the woods had been cleared away.

All was bustle and confusion there. The close was full of armed men, and about the stables and courtyards were many great war-horses, while grooms and men-at-arms ran to and fro on divers

errands, or busied themselves about the horses and their gear. Altogether the scene was one of such liveliness as Wulf had never dreamed the convent could take on.

At the little barred window of the cloister gate where he knocked with Elise, a lay sister was in waiting, who told them the reason of all this business. The new emperor, with his train, was the convent's guest. That night he would bide there, awaiting the coming of the bulk of his army, wherewith, later, he meant to attack the Swartzburg. The sister admitted our travelers, and took Elise straight to the mother superior, leaving Wulf to find the way, which well he knew, to the kitchen.

The emperor and the mother superior were together in the latter's little reception-room when Elise was brought before them, trembling and shy, as a maiden might well be in the presence of royalty and of churchly dignity; but the mother

superior, though she had never seen the little maid, called her by name, the lay sister having made it known, and turned with her to the emperor.

"This, Sire," she said, "is the child of your old friend Von Hofenhoer, and sometime ward of our baron, who, I fear, is ill prepared to make accounting of his stewardship. But why she is here I know not yet, save that Sister Stanislaus tells me that she was brought here a refugee from the castle by the grandson of old Karl of the forge — he of whom you were asking but now."

The emperor was a tall, lean man, with eagle-like visage, clean-shaven and stern. His long, straight hair fell down on either side of his gaunt face, and his eyes were bright and keen. He was plainly, almost meanly dressed. Nevertheless, he was of right kingly aspect, and, moreover, despite his stern looks, he smiled kindly as he placed a hand on Elise's bowed head.

"Thy father was my good comrade, child," he said, "and sorry am I to see his daughter in such a plight; but thou shalt tell us about it presently, and we shall see what is to be done."

The lay sister returned, bearing some wine and a plate of biscuits; and seating her in an arm-chair, the mother superior bade Elise partake of these, which she did gladly. When she had finished, the two dignitaries, who were own cousins and old friends, drew from her, little by little, the story of her flight from the castle, and of her reasons therefor.

As the emperor listened he paced up and down the little stone-floored room, now frowning sternly, now softening a bit as he looked upon the fair young maiden, so spent with fear and hardship.

"This is bad work, Mother Ursula," he said at last, "and well is it that we have come to clean out the jackal's nest. But this boy Wulf whom she speaks of — he would be here yet. Him I would see —

and our good old Karl; would he were here now!"

So Wulf was summoned before the great emperor, and came with swift-beating heart. Brought face to face with Rudolf, he fell upon one knee, cap in hand, and waited the monarch's will.

When the latter spoke it was with great kindliness; for well was he pleased with the goodly-looking youth.

"Thou mayst rise," he said, when he had glanced keenly over the kneeling figure. "And so thou 'rt my old friend Karl's grandson. If there 's aught in blood, thou shouldst be an honest man and a brave; for truer nor braver man ever lived, and well knows Rudolf of Hapsburg that."

A thousand thoughts and impulses surged through Wulf's brain while the emperor spoke, but the moment seemed none for speech other than that with which he finally contented himself, saying simply:

"He brought me up, Sire."

"And that is thy good fortune," cried the emperor. "But tell me when I may have speech of my friend, for there is a matter hath brought me hither that needeth his help, though I knew not that he were even alive until the mother superior here told me of his presence hereabout. Well knew she how Rudolf loved his ancient man-at-arms."

"An he knew what was afoot," Wulf said respectfully, "he were here now to honor the emperor. Readily could I take him a message, your Majesty," he added.

"That were well done," began Rudolf; but Mother Ursula interrupted.

"Nay," she said, "the baron's men belike are even now scouring the country for the boy. 'T were the price of his life to send him forth again—at least, till the Swartzburg is taken."

"True enough," said the emperor. "In faith, my longing in this matter hath made

me forgetful. Well, I must e'en seek another messenger."

"If I might go, Sire," Wulf persisted, with manly modesty that still further won Rudolf's straightforward heart, "no messenger could go so quickly as I—by ways I know that are quite safe. I can fare back now, and be there by daylight."

"By the rood, no!" cried the emperor. "Thou shalt rest some hours ere we think further of this. There 's none too much such timber as thou in the land, that we should be in haste to fell it. Get thee now to refreshment and rest, and if we need thee thou shalt know it."

Thus dismissed, Wulf was fain to be content with retiring, and despite his anxiety to serve the emperor, who had won the boy's whole loyal heart, right glad was he, after a hearty supper, to go to bed. So, when he was shown, at last, into the traveler's dormitory, he threw himself down upon the hard cot spread for him, and fell at once into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER XII

HOW WULF TOOK THE EMPEROR'S MESSAGE TO KARL OF THE FORGE

IT still wanted an hour of daybreak when the convent porter bent over the pallet where Wulf lay and shook the boy into wakefulness.

"Thou 'rt to get up, lad," he said, with gruff kindness. "Eat this and make thyself ready to go an errand. When thou 'rt ready, go to the lady superior in her audience-room."

He put some bread and meat and a tankard of beer upon the floor, and left Wulf to awaken more fully and make such preparation as he had need of.

Mother Ursula and the emperor were still talking when Wulf, having knocked at the door of the little reception-room, answered the former's call to enter. To all appearance neither had taken any rest since Wulf had last seen them, and so eagerly was the emperor talking that neither paid any heed to the boy as he stood waiting their pleasure.

"He was known to have ridden hither," Rudolf was saying, "and to have brought the boy. He was minded to leave him with you, my lady, against his going again to Jerusalem; but no word ever came from either. But gladly would I lay down the crown that is proving overburdensome to my poor head, to set eyes upon the face of either."

The emperor paced the floor sadly, his stern, homely face drawn by emotion.

"He would have sought out Karl, had he known," Rudolf went on. "I must see the man. Ah, here is the boy!"

He turned, seeing the boy, who advanced and did knee-service.

"So," the emperor said, "we are going to use thy stout legs, boy. Make thou their best speed to thy grandsire, and tell him that Count Rudolf rides to the Swartzburg and would have him at hand. Canst do that?"

"Ay, Sire."

"But stay," said Rudolf; "haply he has grown too feeble for bearing arms?"

Wulf flushed with indignation for stalwart Karl.

"Nay," he said stoutly; "he will carry what weapon thou wilt, and enter the castle close behind thee."

"Sh!" cried Mother Ursula, shocked at the boy's speech. "Thou 'rt speaking to the emperor, lad!"

Rudolf laughed. "Let the boy alone," he said. "One may speak freely to whom he will of a man like Karl." Whereupon Mother Ursula hurried to cross herself piously.

"Now hasten," the emperor said kindly, "and God be with thee!" And Wulf went forth.

As he passed through the refectory the porter handed him some food, which he put into his wallet, and filling his leathern water-bottle at the fountain in the convent yard, he fastened it to his belt, and swung out on his journey.

By now had come dawn, and the birds were beginning their earliest twitter among the trees. Later, squirrels and other small deer began to move about, and to chatter among the boughs and in the fallen leaves. The forest was full of pleasant sights and sounds, and the early morning breeze brought sweet, woodsy smells to his eager nostrils.

By and by a red fox stole across an open with a plump hare flung back over his shoulder, and Wulf gave challenge for sheer joy of life and of the morning. Reynard paused long enough to give him a slant glance out of one wise eye, then trotted on. Long pencils of early sunlight began to write cheery greetings on the mossy earth and on the tree-trunks.

The witchery of the hour was upon everything, and Wulf felt boundlessly happy as he stepped along. All his thoughts were vague and sweet—of Elise safe at the convent, doubtless still sleeping; of the emperor's gracious kindness; of Karl's joy at the message he was bringing. Even the sorry medley of half-knowledge about his own name and state had no power to make him unhappy this morning.

Not but that he longed to know the truth. He had never been ashamed to think of himself as Karl's grandson; but the bare idea of something other than that set his blood tingling, and caused such wild hopes to leap within him that, but for the need to walk warily on this errand so fraught with danger, he could have shouted and sung for joy.

He went on steadily, stopping but once, in the middle of the forenoon, to eat a bit of bread and to refill his water-bottle at a clear, pure stream which he crossed.

As he drew near to the neighborhood

of the glade he was minded to turn aside for a look at the scene of yesterday's strange adventure, when he thought he heard a low groan beyond him in the forest. He stood to listen, and presently caught the sound again — the moaning of some creature in mortal pain.

He crept forward warily. As he came nearer to the moaning he became certain that the hurt creature was a man, and he tried to hear whether there might be others with him. No sound reached him, however, save that faint groaning; so at last he parted the drooping branches of an elm-tree, and saw a piteous sight.

There upon the grass, face downward, lay Bell-Hutten, his body rocking softly from side to side as in great agony. His garment of skins was torn from his shoulders, and Wulf noted a torn wound, the blood now dried about it, where the robber's dagger had struck the day before.

As the boy watched, filled with dole,

he saw the poor creature reach back a hand toward an empty water-bottle that lay on the grass. His left hand was stretched forward, the fingers clutching vaguely among the grass and leaves. Wulf's whole nature, as he stood there, ached with horror and pity—horror of the unhappy being upon whom the curse of God and man seemed to have fallen so heavily.

"'T is a pitiful thing," he thought, "and urgent as this business of our emperor's is, I cannot go on and leave the man thus."

"Brother," he called softly, not to startle the sufferer, "what dost want?"

"Water! water! For mercy's sake!"

"Canst manage this?" and loosening his leathern bottle, Wulf handed it to the half-wit.

The poor fever-parched hands grasped it eagerly, drew the stopper, and the man drank.

There was a more human note in the voice that prayed blessing on the boy.

"Hast any food?" Wulf asked.

The unkempt head was shaken, and hastily emptying his wallet, Wulf bent over the man, with the bread and meat which the good sisters had put up for him.

"Bide here until morning," he said, "and I will bring thee more. I must hasten now. I am not on my own business."

He was turning away when he saw growing at his feet masses of the pungent, healing wormwood, and a new thought struck him. Hastily gathering a handful of the tenderest leaves, he filled his mouth and began chewing them with his strong young teeth. It was bitter work, and, in spite of himself, his face twisted grimly as he rolled the wry cud on his tongue; but he stuck to the task till he had a big poultice of the wholesome stuff spread on a broad dock-leaf.

Then, first bathing away the hardened

blood with a little water from the flask, he clapped the poultice deftly upon the sore and angry wound. After that he was forced to go on with all speed; but there was a note of hearty good cheer in his voice as he bade his patient good-morrow.

So he fared on his way, sore shaken in his healthy young nerves, but gathering strength with every onward stride, his own aching arms and legs fair eased as he thought of the comfort his poultice must be bringing to the outcast's hurt shoulder.

Traveling thus, bent now only upon his errand, he never saw the stealthy shadow that, mile after mile, kept pace with him beyond the thicket, dodging when he paused, moving when he moved, until, satisfied as to where he was going, the evil thing hurried back over the way to keep tryst with a master as evil, and to carry the welcome news that the tinker had gone alone back to the forge, where

quick work might surprise and catch him.

It was the middle of the afternoon when he reached the forge and found Karl, who stared at sight of him.

"I 'd dreamed thou wast safe away, boy," he said, shaking him lovingly by the broad shoulders. "What madness is this? The baron's men have been here for thee, and thy life is naught worth if they find thee. Why art so foolhardy, son?"

"Count Rudolf is at St. Ursula's, and sends for thee," Wulf said, laughing at his fears.

Karl turned on the instant, and seized a great sword that lay on the anvil.

"Sayst so? And thou hast seen the count — I mean the emperor? How looked he? What said he? And he remembered old Karl? Ah! his was ever a true heart." The rough face was alight with loving, excited pride.

"Give me a bite to eat, and we 'll fare back together," Wulf said; but Karl became anxious again.

"Nay," he said. "Thou 'st escaped the baron's wolves this time, but by now they swarm the woods. Moreover, thou art tired out. Bide thee in hiding here. They will never dream that thou art simple enough to come aback to the forge after this time. Here is thy best refuge now. Rest, then, and by to-morrow the emperor's men will have harried them all back to the castle to defend the place."

To Wulf this word seemed wise, and fain was he to rest, being footsore and weary; so he busied himself with helping Karl make ready. No armorer's staff did the stout fellow take now, but a strong, shapely bow, from off the smithy wall. He tried it over his knee as he fitted cord to it, smiling grimly the while. Of arrows he took a goodly number, and girt himself with a short two-edged sword. His fierce joy imparted itself to Wulf, who watched him.

At last Karl went to the cupboard beside the forge, and opening it, lifted out the shining knight's sword.

"This be the blade I have told ye of, lad," he said — "the very one; for I gave Herr Banf mine own, that had never seen battle, and kept this one for thee."

He ran his thumb along the keen edge. "Mayhap thou 'st no claim on earth to it," he said, "yet no man hath showed a better, and thou 'lt give it play for the emperor, whose service owns it; so take it. But, lad, lad," he cried, "an ye love God and this poor lost land, remember 't was a brave and a true man first carried that sword 'gainst foe."

"Ay, ay, Karl, I will remember," said Wulf, solemnly, taking the sword in hand. Karl had fitted it with a plain, strong scabbard, and it was ready for stout and worthy deeds. A thrill went through the boy as he girt it to him, and there beside the forge, silently, within his own mind, he vowed that blade to knightly and true service.

Then Karl bade him good-by and stepped forth through the woods, to do the emperor's bidding.

CHAPTER XIII

HOW WORD OF HIS DANGER CAME TO WULF AT THE FORGE

ONCE Karl was gone, Wulf set to work to cook some food for himself over the forge fire, and when he had eaten he barred the smithy door of heavy bolted planks, and threw himself down upon the armorer's pallet to seek the rest he so much needed.

Meantime, through the dim, leafy reaches of the forest a man dragged himself painfully, now catching at the great tree-boles that he might not fall, now staggering forward in a vain attempt to run, then dropping on all fours to creep forward, never halting altogether, but ever, in some way or other, pressing on-

ward hour after hour, and so making headway. He had muffled his telltale bell, and his face was set in deadly determination to the gaining of some great end. So the half-wit fared through the forest that night on an errand of human love, and no beast crossed his path to hinder, nor bewraying twig or bough crackled under his feet to warn any foe of his coming.

How long Wulf had slept he knew not, but his slumber at last became fitful and uneasy, and presently he was ware of some noise at the great door of the smithy. From the rays of moonlight that stole in through the chinks, he knew that the night must be well-nigh spent, but he was yet heavy with sleep and could not rightly get awake on the moment.

He sprang up at last, however, sword in hand, and waited to hear further. If this were a foe it were none of any great strength to stand thus, making no clamor, but calling softly.

"Open! Open!" a voice outside cried in a hoarse, imploring whisper. "In the name of Heaven, make haste to open! No foe is here, but only one weak man who comes to warn ye of danger. 'T is poor Bell-Hutten, who means no harm to him who saved him in the forest. Open! Open!"

Softly, then, Wulf drew out the great forged bolt that held it, and keeping the steel weapon-wise in his right hand, threw open the door.

"What wouldst have? Art hungry?"

"Nay; speak not of my wants, but tell me — art named Wulf, and do men call thee the tinker?"

"Some men do; but they be no friends of mine."

"That I warrant; but death is at thy heels; an thou get not from here he will be quickly at thy throat."

"What is toward?" asked Wulf, making ready to step forth.

"Nay, that I know not, save that 't is

harm to thee. Yonder I lay where ye left me, when there came two skulkers in the bushes, and one told the other how he had followed one whom, from their talk, I deemed to be thee, and how thou hadst come on to the smithy here. Yet, though they were twain, durst they not come for thee, but went their way to get help at the Swartzburg; whereupon I came away hither, by such snail's pace as I might; but sore I feared lest they might be here before me. Now get thou away, and quickly!"

"I thank thee, friend," said Wulf, "and straight will I."

Bell-Hutten made a quick gesture.

"Alas!" he groaned. "'T is too late. They be upon thee now!"

Sure enough; all too plainly, through the trees, could be heard the sound of horsemen coming up rapidly, albeit with some caution.

"Canst not hide?" gasped Bell-Hutten.

"Ay, and well. Get thee to the bush!"

"WITH THE HEAD OF HIS BATTLE-AX HE STRUCK IT A BLOW THAT SENT IT INWARD."

And closing the door behind him, Wulf sprang to the great oak, his friend and shelter in childhood and boyhood, now his haven in deadly peril. Easily he swung himself up, higher and higher, until he was safe among the thick foliage of the broad, spreading top. So huge were the branches, even here, that a man might stand beneath and look up at the very one where Wulf lay, yet never dream that aught were hidden there.

The baron himself was of the party who rode up around the smithy just as Wulf was settled in his place. Straight to the door he drove his horse, and with the head of his battle-ax struck it a blow that sent it inward on its hinges.

One or two men bearing torches sprang into the house, and the single room became suddenly alight, but no one showed there. Hastily they ransacked the place, while the baron sat his horse and roared forth his orders, sending one man here, another yonder, to be at the thicket and

scour all the places. One even came under the great tree and held up his torch, throwing the light high aloft, but seeing naught of Wulf.

Then the baron laughed savagely.

"This is thy chase, nephew Conradt," he jeered. "Said I not he would never be here? The armorer's whelp is a hanging rogue fast enough, but no fool to blunder hither, once he were safe away with the girl."

"Peradventure," began Conradt, but just then came in two spearmen, driving the outcast before them, staggering as he walked.

"This we found in the thicket and haled out," they began; but Conradt and some of the others shrank back hastily, for in the dim light the poor half-wit was a terrible sight. But the baron showed no fear.

"Hast seen any man hid hereabout?" he asked. "We seek a gallows escape, by name Wulf."

The sorry creature only stared vacantly, and then sank to the ground.

"Answer me!" roared the baron. "Dost know him we seek? What art doing here thyself?"

There was no reply.

"Let me make him speak," Conradt cried, bold now amid that company; and with drawn sword he came forward.

"So thou 'lt not give tongue?" he screamed. "By the rood, I do believe thou knowest where the tinker hath hidden. Out with it, then, ere I split that devil's head of thine!"

His blade gleamed in the moonlight, and the wretched outcast on the ground raised a beseeching hand. But that blow was never to fall. Instead, as from heaven itself, came a flying shaft, deadly and sure, that struck Conradt's sword-arm, and snapped it as it had been a dead twig.

It was flung by Wulf, who, forgetting his own danger in wrath to see that help-

less man so beset, had hurled, from his hiding-place, the great bolt of forged steel, which, in his haste, he had not cast aside ere climbing the tree. He looked, after that, to see them all rush toward him; but, instead, even the baron was smitten with fear, and deemed, as did his men, that the wrath of God had fallen upon them all for Conradt's sin in raising blade against him whom Heaven had already marked with vengeance. Most of the soldiers fled upon the instant; but one of his own men helped the hunchback to saddle, and mounting behind to hold him up, they joined the company that raced, flockmeal, away from the place, so that soon not one remained, nor any sound from them came back upon the wind.

Nevertheless, Wulf deemed it best not to venture down, but lay along a great bough of the oak-tree, and at last fell into a doze that lasted until daylight. Even then, when he would have descended, his quick ears caught the sound of passers

no great distance off; so he kept his hiding-place hour after hour, until at last, when the sun shining upon the tree-tops told him that the noon was close at hand, all seemed so still that he swung himself down — stiffly, for he was cramped and sore — and gained the ground.

Then was his heart sorrowful, to see, among the bushes that crept up to the edge of the open, the outcast lying still and stark upon his face.

Wulf ran forward, and bending over him, called him by name, but he never stirred nor answered; nevertheless, as Wulf raised the man's head the closed eyes opened for an instant, though the lids at once fell again.

Hastily gathering the worn figure in his arms, Wulf bore it into the smithy and laid it on Karl's bed. Then he busied himself with blowing up the fire in the forge and warmed some goat's milk which, little by little, he succeeded in forcing between the white lips. He chafed the limp

hands and wrapped warmly the cold body, until by and by a stronger flutter of life came in the faint heart-beats, and the man's breathing was more noticeable.

Wulf worked desperately, for his sorrow was great at the thought of what the outcast had gone through for him.

"An I had dreamt he was there," he said to himself in self-reproach, "I had never bided there in the tree. A sinner he may have been, and a black traitor, as men do say, but he had that in him of gratitude which God will not forget!"

Between times, as he worked over the sufferer, he began gathering up certain weapons and other matters on which he knew that Karl set value, and these he hid within the cupboard beside the chimney. Busied thus, it was far in the afternoon when, as he was giving his patient another sip of warm milk, the latter suddenly opened his eyes and gazed at Wulf with a calm look of understanding and peace. This, however, quickly turned to

anxiety and alarm as he began to remember what had gone before. His wandering reason was for the moment present and clear.

"Thou here?" he gasped. "Go; leave me here! They are after thee — they will find thee!"

"An they do," Wulf said quietly, "they will find me in that place where is most claim upon me."

At that moment he caught the sound of approaching men. Indeed, even the dulled ears of the sick man had long since been ware of it, and the noise was what had roused him; but Wulf's attention had been all on his tasks, and he had no warning until from all the openings about the clearing appeared horsemen and foot-soldiers, while from beyond came the noise of horses and armor and of men's voices.

Springing to the door, Wulf stood at bay, sword in hand, meaning to sell his life dearly rather than be taken or give

up his charge, when a voice that he knew was raised, and Karl the armorer shouted:

"Nay, lad; an thou 'rt a loyal German, give thine emperor better homage than that!" And through all his weariness and daze Wulf made out to come forward and kneel at the emperor's stirrup.

They were friends, not foes, who had come this time.

CHAPTER XIV

OF THE GREAT BATTLE THAT WAS FOUGHT, AND OF HOW WULF SAVED THE DAY

NOW were Wulf's anxieties well over; for this great company of riders and foot-soldiers was none other than the main part of the Emperor Rudolf's army, that had ridden on that day from St. Ursula's wood; for the emperor's will was that to-morrow should see the attack begun on the Swartzburg.

They were still an hour's march from the place set for resting that night, where would gather to them a smaller body that had come by another way, minded to meet with a company of riders from the castle, known to be hereabout. So, when he

had spoken kindly to young Wulf, for whose sake, indeed, the troop had made their way lie past the forge, Rudolf of Hapsburg bade the boy fall in with the men, and the whole company again went forward, the sick man borne upon a hastily made litter by four of the foot-soldiers.

Getting for himself a good bow and arrow from the smithy, Wulf fell in with the ranks of footmen, and then was he amazed to find that his right-hand neighbor was Hansei from the Swartzburg.

Right pleased was he at the discovery, though well he wondered what it might mean, and he made haste to ask Hansei about the matter. Then did he hear how, two days before, a company of knights and others from the castle, riding in chase of Elise and himself, had fallen in with an outriding party of Rudolf's men, and there had been fighting.

"Ay," said Wulf, remembering, "and there at hand were we when that fighting began."

"Glad am I that we knew it not," Hansei cried. "For the most part of the emperor's men were slain or taken prisoner, and few escaped to carry word to the convent; but with them ran I: for I had small stomach to fight 'gainst the lawful rulers of this land, and thou a hunted man beside."

Then did Hansei ask Wulf of his faring in the woods, whereupon Wulf, as they marched, told him all the story, and how the outcast had come to warn him, and of how the poor fellow had been like to die there by the smithy, and how he had cared for him. But Hansei was filled with dread at that part of the tale, for he feared for Wulf that he had given shelter to the traitor, as he believed Bell-Hutten to be.

"Nay; but he is a fellow-man who risked his life for me," Wulf said.

"But a black sinner was he, curst of God and men," Hansei answered. "And what says the priest o' Sundays? Is 't not that we should hate evil?"

"To hate evil, surely," said Wulf, soberly; "yet not to forget, as we are men, where evil touches good; for this does it, at one point and another, even as never a bane groweth, here in the forest, but its unbane lives near neighbor to it. And it were foolishness, Hansei, if nothing more, to let the thought that he was a sinner hinder our helping a fellow in need."

"Better foolishness than sin," muttered Hansei, turning a bit sullen at the reproof.

"'T is not so certain," replied Wulf. "For between sin and foolishness there lies this difference: that God forgiveth our sins an we repent; but our foolishness is like to get i' the grain of us at last, and naught kills it then but that we die ourselves."

So talking, the two kept pace with the marching company, until, by nightfall, they came up with the other party, and camp was made, well on the road toward the Swartzburg.

No fires were built; for Rudolf of Hapsburg was minded, if possible, to come close before the castle gates ere those within were aware; but every man cared for his own needs as best he might, and before long the whole host was sleeping, save for the watchers.

It was nigh upon daybreak when a wild alarum went through the camp, so that every man sprang to his feet and grasped his weapon as he ran forward in the darkness to learn what the matter was. The cries of men, the clashing of weapons and armor, the shrill screams of wounded horses, came up on every side, while so dark was it that for a little time the emperor's soldiers scarce knew friend from foe as they pressed on, half dazed.

Soon, however, they made shift to form their array in some sort of order, and there in the forest began a mighty battle.

For the baron, filled with vanity and wrath, and made foolhardy by the easy

victory his men had won over Rudolf's soldiers two days before, had planned this night attack, knowing, through Conradt's spies, where the emperor's army were lying, and deeming that it would be a light matter to set upon that force in the darkness, and destroy it, man and horse.

But Baron Everhardt had believed that that smaller body which the spies had seen and brought him word of was the main army, and so the men of the Swartzburg had all unthinkingly walked into a trap where they had been minded to set one.

Sharp and grim now the fighting went on, sword meeting sword, pike striking spear, as knight met knight or common soldier alike in the confusion. Above all the din rang out the battle-cries of the two parties, the Swartzburg men ever meeting the royal war-cry, "God and the emperor!" with their own ringing watch-word, "The Swartzburg and liberty!'

until the whole wood seemed filled with the sound.

In the midst of the fray went Rudolf of Hapsburg, with his great two-handed sword, cleaning a way for those behind him. No armor wore he, save a light shirt of chain mail, and no shield save his helmet; but beside him fought Karl the armorer, with a huge battle-ax, so that Wulf, catching glimpse of him in the press at day-dawn, felt a great joy fill his heart at sight of that good soldier.

Not long could he look, however, for he and Hansei were in the thick of it, well to the fore, where Rudolf's banner-bearer had his place. In the close quarters there was no work for the bowmen, so Wulf fought with the sword that Karl had given him the day before, and a goodly blade he found it; while Hansei wielded a great pike that he had wrested from one of the baron's men, and laid about him lustily wherever a foe showed.

So the hours passed, and many men

were slain on either side, when it began to be felt by the emperor's soldiers that the Swartzburg men were slowly falling back toward the defile to gain the castle.

"An they do that," Hansei gasped, as he met Wulf again, "a long and weary siege will be ours; for thou well knowest the Swartzburg's strength, and well hath the baron made ready."

Then to Wulf came a right warcraftly notion, which he told to Hansei, whereupon the two set to gather to them some score or more of the young men, and these fell back toward the edge of the battle, until they were out of the press and hastening through the wood, as Wulf knew how to lead them.

They came at last to the morass, not far from where he and Elise had crossed that night when they fled from the castle.

"There is never a crossing there!" Hansei cried, aghast, when he saw the place; but Wulf laughed.

"Crossing there is," he said lightly,

"so that ye all follow me softly, stepping where I step. Mind ye do that, for beyond the willows and the pool yonder is quicksand, and that means death, for no footing is there for any helper."

Thus warned, the young men looked at one another uneasily; but none fell back; so, unseen by the foe, and noting well each step that Wulf made, they followed him until at last they won clear across that treacherous morass, and came safe aland again among the osiers, well up the pass toward the Swartzburg. Here they rested, getting their wind, and jesting in high glee, as hot-hearted young fellows do, over the sport that was to follow.

More than an hour they waited there, and by and by the sound of battle began swelling up the defile. The baron's men were in retreat, but fighting stoutly, as they fell back, pressed close by the foe. Already had the baron wound his horn loud and long, and cheerily was it answered from the watch-tower with a blast

which told that the keepers there were in readiness, and that open gates and safe shelter awaited the retreating men—when out at their backs sprang Wulf and his fellows, and fell upon them right and left.

Then wild confusion was on all. Those attacked at the rear pressed forward upon their comrades, who knew not what had happened, and drove them back again to meet the swords and pikes of those lusty young men who made the most of the foes' surprise, and cut down many a seasoned warrior ere he could well learn how he was attacked.

Then the baron sounded his horn again, and out from the castle came all of the Swartzburg's reserve to the rescue, and Wulf and his little band were in turn beset, and like to be destroyed, had not Rudolf himself, riding his great war-horse, and followed close by Karl, cut a way through the Swartzburg ranks to their aid.

By now the fighting was man to man, pell-mell, all up the pass, and so confused was that mass of battling soldiery that

friend and foe of the Swartzburg pressed together across the draw and in through the castle gates, fighting as fight a pack of wolves when one is down.

Then, above all the din, sounded Herr Banf's voice, calling the men of the Swartzburg to the baron, and there against the wall of the outer bailey made they their last stand. Well had Baron Everhardt fought among his men, but at last a well hurled spear thrown from one of the emperor's soldiers pierced his helm and entered his brain, as he was rallying his friends, and there he fell.

Quickly Herr Banf and Herr Werner took him up and bore him within the inner bailey, while without the fighting went on. But the castle's men fought half-heartedly now; for their leader was gone, and well knew they that they were battling against their lawful emperor. So ere long all resistance fell away, and the emperor and his men poured, unhindered, into the courtyard.

The Swartzburg was taken.

CHAPTER XV

HOW THE SHINING KNIGHT'S TREASURE WAS BROUGHT TO LIGHT

IT was high noon when the last of the knights of the Swartzburg laid down his arms at the feet of the emperor and swore fealty to him. Of the castle's company Herr Banf was missing; for he had ridden forth, in the confusion that followed the entrance of Rudolf's men, to make his way through the woods and thence out from that land, minded rather to live an outlaw than to bend knee to the foe of his well loved friend.

A wise ruler as well as a brave soldier was Rudolf of Hapsburg, and well knew he how to win as well as to conquer. So, when all the knights had taken oath,

to each was returned his arms, and him the emperor greeted as friend.

Within the castle hall the dead master lay at rest, and beside him watched the baroness, a pale, broken-spirited lady, whose life had been one long season of fear of her liege lord, and who now felt as little sorrow as hope. Her the emperor had already visited, to pay her respect and to assure her of protection, and now, with the two or three women of that stern and wild household of men-folk, she waited what might come.

Meanwhile, through castle and stables and offices the emperor's appointed searchers went, taking note of all things; but Rudolf of Hapsburg sat in the courtyard, in sight of his men, who were by now making shift to prepare themselves a meal; for the greater number had not tasted food that day.

To Wulf the whole changed scene seemed like a dream, so familiar the place, yet so strange — as one in sleep

finds some place that he knows well puzzle him by some unwonted aspect. He stood watching the soldiers feeding here and there about the bailey, when there came two squires from the keep, leading between them a bent and piteous figure.

It was a man who cowered and blinked and sought to cover his dazzled eyes from the unwonted light of day. Him the soldiers brought before the emperor, and on the moment Wulf knew that face to be the one which he had seen at the barred window of the keep on the day when he had climbed the tower.

"What is this?" demanded Rudolf, as he looked the woeful figure up and down. Scarce bore it likeness to a man, so unkempt and terrible was its aspect, so drawn and wan the face, wherein no light of reason showed.

"We know not, your Majesty," one of the squires replied; "but we found him in a cell high up in the keep, chained by

the ankle to a stone bench, and I broke the fetter with a sledge."

By now the nobles and knights of Rudolf's army were gathered about; but none spoke, for pity. Then the emperor caused all the knights of the Swartzburg to be summoned, and he questioned them close, but not one of them knew who the man might be, or why he was a prisoner at the Swartzburg. Indeed, of all the company, only one or two knew that such a prisoner had been held in the keep. Of the two men who might have told his name, one lay dead in the great hall, and one was riding from the Swartzburg, an outlaw.

But the emperor was troubled. A haunting something in that seemingly empty face drew his very heartstrings, and fain would he have known the man's name. Then suddenly through the press of knights and nobles rushed Karl the armorer, and clasped the woeful figure in his arms, while he trembled and sobbed with wrath and sorrow.

"Oh, my lord!" he cried, bringing the man closer before Rudolf. "Look upon this! Knowest thou not who 't is?"

The emperor had grown very white, and he passed one hand over his eyes.

"Nay," he said; "it is never — it cannot be —"

"Oh, my lord! my lord!" sobbed the armorer, his great chest heaving and the tears streaming down from his unashamed eyes. "It *is* the count — Count Bernard himself, thine old comrade, whom thou and I didst love. Look upon him!"

So white now was the emperor that his face was like death; but it was set in fierce wrath, too, as, little by little, he began to see that Karl might be right. He bent forward and laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Bernard, friend Bernard!" he called loudly, that the dulled senses might take in his words. "Bernard, dost know me?"

Slowly the other looked up; a dim light seemed to gather in his eyes.

"Ay, Rudolf," he whispered hoarsely;

then the light went out, and he shrank back again.

"There is a tale I would have told your Majesty," Karl said, recovering himself, "an the herald had not come just as he did on the night before last"; and then, seeing Wulf in the throng, he called him to come forward.

Wondering, the boy obeyed, while, with a hand on his arm, Karl told the emperor all that he had been able to tell Wulf that day at the forge — of the battle between the knights, of how he had thereafter found the stranger child in the osiers, and how he had kept the blade which Herr Banf had won.

"Now know I of surety," he said at last, "that that knight was Count Bernard von Wulfstanger; but who this boy may be I can only guess."

Now a voice spoke from amid the throng. Hansei, who had been edging nearer and nearer, could keep silence no longer.

"That would be the 'shining knight's'

treasure! Well I remember it, your Majesty!" he cried.

"What meanest thou?" demanded Rudolf; and there before them all Hansei told what the children saw from the playground on the plateau that day so many years agone.

The emperor's face grew thoughtful as he looked at Wulf from under lowered brows.

"Ay," he said at last; "'t is like to be true. Count Bernard rode this way with the babe, meaning to leave him with our cousin at St. Ursula; for his mother was dead, and he was off to the Holy Land. He must have missed the convent road and got on the wrong way. Thou art strongly like him in looks, lad."

His voice was shaking, but Wulf noted it not; for he had drawn near to Karl, who was bending over the wan prisoner. The boy's heart was nearly broken with pity.

Was this his father, this doleful figure now resting against Karl, wholly unable

to support itself? Gently Wulf pressed the armorer back and took the slight weight in his strong young arms. "'T is mine to do, an ye all speak truth," he said.

Few were the dry eyes in that company as Wulf circled the frail body to him and the weary head rested itself quietly against his breast.

"See that he is cared for," the emperor said at last, and from the throng came the noblest of those knights to carry the count into the castle. Wulf would have gone with them, but Rudolf called him back.

"Stand forth," he said, pointing to a spot just before him, and Wulf obeyed.

"Thou 'st fought well to-day, boy," Rudolf went on. "But for thy ready wit, that led thy fellows by a way to fall upon the foe from behind, this castle had been long in the winning, and our work by that much hindered. Thou hast proven thy gentle blood by the knightly deed

thou didst by the young maid, now our own ward, and sure are we that thou 'rt the son of our loved comrade Count Bernard von Wulfstanger. Kneel down."

Then, as Wulf knelt, fair dazed by the surging of his own blood in his ears, the emperor laid drawn sword across his bowed shoulders.

"Rise, Herr Wulf von Wulfstanger," he said.

The young knight, trembling like any timid maid, got to his feet again, though how he could not have told.

"He 'll need thy nursing a bit, Karl," Rudolf of Hapsburg said, an amused smile playing about his grim mouth; and our Wulf never knew that the old armorer more carried than led him away to quiet and rest.

Not all in a day was order restored at the Swartzburg; for many and woeful had been the deeds of the high-handed robber who had so long ruled within those grim

"THE EMPEROR LAID DRAWN SWORD ACROSS HIS BOWED SHOULDERS."

walls. They came to light little by little under the searching of the emperor's wardens; and when the parchments relating to the Swartzburg properties came to be examined, it was found that not the baron, nor Conradt, his heir-at-law, had all along been owner of the castle, but young Elise von Hofenhoer, whose guardian the treacherous noble had been. There were other outlying lands, as well, from which the baron had long collected the revenues, and it was to keep his hold on that which he had so evilly gotten that he would have married Elise to Conradt, his nephew and ready tool.

The emperor himself now became guardian to the maiden, who, happy in the safe shelter of St. Ursula, was to remain there until such time as a husband might claim the right to fend for her and hers, if need should come.

And now our Wulf of the forge and the forest abode in the hall of his fathers as Count Wulf von Wulfstanger, and made

bright that wronged one's days. Rudolf of Hapsburg had long been in charge of the estates of the lost nobleman, and a straight accounting made the honest soldier-emperor to Wulf, as his heir, of all that he had held in trust.

With old Karl for helper and adviser, Wulf, all doubt and mystery cleared, ruled his great domain. Later he brought home his fair bride from St. Ursula, given into his keeping by the emperor himself, and thereafter, the story tells, Baron Wulf and his lady lived long a life of usefulness and good deeds; whereby those hard times were made easier for many, and the sunshine, gathered through the years, made warmth and light for others, as must always be in this world, when any life is lived for the sake of usefulness and helpfulness.

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